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**THE
IDEAL
SPONGER
LIFE**



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INTRODUCTION

A GULF BETWEEN THE COUPLE?

Zenjirou has thus far been completely devoted to **Aura**. But this time—for the first time ever—he's appalled by her methods. **Are their opinions diverging?!**

The story takes an unexpected turn as Zenjirou steps up into a position of **command** in the **swarm raptor subjugation**.

A **new heroine? A crisis for the couple?** And these **swarm raptors?** There's so much to read here as volume 5 begins!

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Prologue — A Ship Sighted

Valentia was the coastal capital of Capua and home to its largest port.

The governor of the city, which was one of the largest in the country, was known as the Duke of Valentia, but the region had been under the direct command of the monarch for over eighty percent of its history, and that continued to this day.

In addition to being the queen of the country, Aura was also the Duchess of Valentia. After all, the city was both the biggest producer of salt and the busiest port in the country. Depending on the time of year, it could have more people, goods, and money flowing through it than anywhere else in Capua. It was hardly surprising that the previous monarchs had decided that unless there was someone they had absolute faith in, both in regard to ability and character, they could not let another hold sway over it.

In Aura's case, all other royals had perished in the war, so she was unable to pass on the responsibility even if she had wished to.

Regardless, the circumstances meant that the city was currently, at least nominally, under her direct control. Naturally, her duties as queen in the capital meant that she couldn't take command of the city in person, so the local affairs were actually managed by a separate governor.

Ordinarily, scattered holdings being under the command of a third party would lead to them being nothing but hotbeds for corruption and military expansion, but there was relatively little risk of that in Capua. The royal family held the lineal space-time magic and could use teleportation magic. When a trusted retainer could appear from the capital with no warning, any governor would hesitate to rebel.

The bulk of the manpower and funds used in the city was, of course, used on the port. Several jetties jutted out into the bay from the well-maintained banks, each of them made of solid stone and wide enough for large carriages to pass each other. The depth of the water was also sufficient so that even the

exceptionally deep-drafted vessels from the Northern Continent could navigate without issue. There was an alternating, three-fold system of breakwaters outside of the harbor as well, which prevented the swells from entering and made it easier for ships to enter and leave the area. All of this meant that even in the tempests of the rainy season, no ship moored in Valentia had capsized in over a decade.

Finally, on the tip of a spur of land, there was an immense lighthouse. The building was a circular pillar, like a candle, and while it would be lost among the sea of skyscrapers in a modern city, there was nothing of the like around as it towered over all.

The jetties, breakwaters, and lighthouse were all huge stone structures. The sight of each of them would dizzy onlookers with the amount of money and labor that had gone into their creation. There was a good reason the city was called the largest port in the west.

The port was now as busy as ever as sailors and laborers rushed about this way and that under the clear blue skies and pleasant sea breeze.

“Scuse me, rush cargo comin’ through!”

“Ya sure that’s enough jerky? ’S pretty light.”

“Hey! No fighting on the jetty! You’ll be barred!”

Soldiers armed with short spears mediated among the bustle when it looked like fists were about to fly. Guards in the main capital were clad in something along the lines of leather armor, but perhaps in deference to their location, the Valentian guards wore only thin shirts and pants.

A closer inspection would reveal that the tips of their spears didn’t shine in the least, even under the brilliant sun. They were likely sharpened drake bone rather than metal. While defending the port, they were not only exposed to the salty breeze but also spray from the sea. Therefore, without significant maintenance, anything metal would rust away quickly. A slightly grandiose term for it would be “special equipment for the bay.”

The other thing that drew the eye was the odd person here or there who was using a hand cart. The wooden tool had just gone on sale in the capital and was

an amazing convenience in the port city, where moving heavy loads was a daily occurrence. The small wooden wheels meant that it was a necessity for the surfaces to be paved, but fortunately, Valentia met that requirement.

There weren't many of them at present, and the price was rather high, so they weren't a common sight, but it may not have been a too distant future where those wooden carts became standard in the port.

Their utility was obvious from just a single use. When one compared the gaits of the laborers dripping with sweat, sacks, and boxes on their shoulders to those using the carts to haul even heavier loads, the latter had much lighter steps, making the efficiency of the carts obvious.

Those without carts could only focus on what was in front of them as they sweat, while those with carts walked easily, pushing them along and taking in their surroundings.

Thus, it was almost preordained that the first person to notice was one of those with a cart.

"Hmmm? Wassat?" a young laborer asked, stopping and peering out at the horizon.

"Hey, what're you doing?! You'll see someone in the water stoppin' like that," scolded a middle-aged laborer with the load on his back.

"Ah, sorry," the former replied to the man behind him, "I just saw an unfamiliar ship out there."

"Huh? Unfamiliar?" the older man asked, not stopping but turning to look in that direction. Unfortunately, however, he could only see the expanse of sea. "There's nuh'n there."

"There is. I saw the masts over the horizon."

The man seemed to understand as he nodded, the sack still on his right shoulder.

"Ah, yeah, you got pretty good eyes, ain't you?"

"I have; it's my best feature. The ship was damned huge, though, even from that far away. I've not seen one as big before."

“Oh, probably one of those large sailing boats.”

“Large sailing boats? There are ships bigger than what we’ve got ’round here?”

“Aye, the ships ’round here are all one mast, lateen or square. Bigger exist, though; the Northern Continent have got some with three,” the older man answered, wiping his brow to keep the sweat from his eyes and squinting to see for himself. All he could discern was a speck on the horizon.

With no other recourse, he turned to his younger, better-eyed colleague and asked him, “What d’you see, then?”



“Okay, the angle’s a bit... Hang on, I can see it! Man, there’re a lot of masts. One, two, three...four? Huh? Are there any with four masts, not three?”

The older man’s expression changed dramatically at his compatriot’s question.

“Four masts?! You sure about that?!” he demanded.

The young laborer was surprised by his senior’s shock but looked again. However many times he checked, the count didn’t change.

“Yeah, I’m sure. There’s definitely four masts there.”

The elder’s response was rapid. “Take this!” he yelled, dumping the sack atop his shoulder into the youth’s cart.

“Hey! You can’t shove that much on it! The wheels break if you overload it! I won’t get paid for days if it does!” he protested, but the older man lacked the composure to care.

“That ain’t important! I gotta tell the governor! Blame me if it breaks!”

“The lighthouse keeps watch; they probably saw it quicker than me.”

“It’s just in case! I’m counting on you!” His piece said, the middle-aged man sprinted away. He vanished in moments, yelling to be let through the crowded jetty as he went.

The abandoned youth opened his mouth wordlessly as he looked at his overloaded cart. It was hardly surprising, considering his lack of understanding of the circumstances. It looked like the older man had merely taken an excuse to bail on work.

However, anyone who knew what those four masts represented would have understood why he’d done it. The people of the Southern Continent generally lacked shipbuilding skills and primarily built single-masted ships. Three-masted examples were almost universally trading vessels from the Northern Continent. They were essentially cutting-edge with their more advanced techniques, so anyone who personally owned one was a trader whose name would be known across the country.

The significance of an even bigger ship, with four masts, was easy to see. They

were the absolute peak of innovation, owned by the country itself, and would never be allowed into private hands. In addition, even on the Northern Continent, there were very few countries both big enough and advanced enough to build such a ship. With one of those ships appearing off the coast of Valentia, it meant that one of the most powerful people on that continent had arrived.



The name of the four-masted ship that had appeared near Valentia was *Glisir's Leaf*.

It was the finest ship of the Kingdom of Uppasala, a country to the far north of the Northern Continent. Even they, known for being at the forefront of such developments, only had one other four-masted ship. It was the flagship of their navy, *Naglfar*.

Standing atop its vast deck, Freya Uppasala gave an emotional, relieved look at the first land she had seen in one hundred and twenty days.

“We can finally dock,” she said.

“We can, Princess. The port is splendid, and even we should be able to berth with no issue.”

“Indeed. I am not a princess at present, though, Skaji. I am a captain. Please keep that in mind,” the girl with silver-blue hair—Freya Uppasala—told the female warrior behind her, still focused on Valentia.

“Excuse me, Captain,” the woman called Skaji answered with a soft smile and slight nod.

Freya Uppasala, as her name implied, was a princess of Uppasala. Women could not ascend the throne in the country, so she had no place in the line of succession, but that didn’t change the fact that she was one of the highest-ranking nobles in the country.

She had straight, silver hair with a tinge of blue to it and icy azure eyes that gave an almost frozen impression, along with almost unrealistically pale skin. She had a beauty befitting a “Northern Princess,” which would doubtlessly be shown if she wore a dress and jewels.

However, while her clothing still held a slight elegance to it, it looked more like a man's wardrobe, prioritizing function over form, and her originally waist-length, beautiful hair had been shorn to just below her neck. She was dressed as a man in order to captain *Glafir's Leaf*.

From time immemorial, the people of the Kingdom of Uppasala—the Sveans—saw their ships as women. As captaining a ship was akin to marrying it, a captain also had to be a man. Thus, if a woman was to captain a ship, she would have to act as a man while on board.

Of course, this was ultimately customary, and they did not literally need to become men. Thus, her appearance was that of a beautiful woman wearing male clothes. If anything, the simple men's outfit highlighted her womanly curves from her chest to her waist.

Freya turned her head to address the woman behind her. "So, have you established where this port is?"

The woman folded her tall frame into a bow at her mistress's question and answered, "We have. The positions of the stars last night and our current heading indicate that this is the Kingdom of Capua."

"The Kingdom of Capua?" Freya queried, searching her memories.

Uppasala was in the northernmost reaches of the Northern Continent, so they had very little information about the Southern Continent at all. It was like asking a European in the age of discovery about the Asian countries. That said, Freya had become a captain of her own volition, so she was much more knowledgeable than the general public.

"I seem to recall that Capua is a country in the midwest of the Southern Continent? We have drifted farther than expected."

The taller woman gave a nod in confirmation of the captain's dredged-up knowledge and offered some words of agreement. "Indeed, I have heard that it is among the biggest countries in the west of the continent. Things will be somewhat complicated due to the lack of direct diplomatic relations between our nations, but I have heard no rumors that are cause for concern. I would wager they will at least abide by the rules of the sea."

“The rules of the sea” was a culture of mutual support amongst those who lived on the water. The actual contents were nothing impressive—it boiled down to allowing even completely unknown ships to use a free berth and to disembark in the harbor. After all, navigation in this world was far from that of modern Earth. Even if someone plotted their course, the probability that everything would go as planned was essentially zero.

It was far from rare for ships to run out of food, suffer outbreaks of disease, get swept up in unforeseen storms, and end up in completely unexpected waters. Therefore, there was a principle of allowing emergency entry into ports. Naturally, ships from hostile countries or ships that were clearly run by pirates were not subject to that rule.

“Then we should be able to allow our sailors to disembark. Considering the burden placed upon them, that is my highest priority.”

The warrior replied in agreement to her captain’s concern for their sailors. “Of course, Captain. However, please give yourself the same allowance. Begging your pardon, but your stamina is among the lowest of our crew.”

“Thank you for your concern, Skaji, but I am fine. I have had little to do for the entire voyage.”

“Naturally, if something were to happen to our captain, it would be the end of our ship.”

While the woman’s words were certainly exaggerated, they were not figurative in the least. While the engineering behind the ship was akin to that of Earth’s ships in the Middle Ages, they had both advantages and disadvantages over Earth. The advantage was, frankly, the existence of magic. Types of purification magic on water were particularly revolutionary in terms of sailing.

Until recent times, drinking water had been the biggest problem with sailing. In this world, where potable water was a simple casting of magic away, the sailors’ circumstances were completely different.

Glasir’s Leaf’s water supply was handled solely by Freya. With that taken into account, the warrior’s statement was clearly no joke. There were, of course, other people who could use the spell too, but even if they all pooled their efforts, they would only be able to produce enough water to barely survive.

Freya was well aware of the burden on her shoulders—that if anything happened to her, her sailors would soon dehydrate. So she had heeded the veterans' and warrior's warnings and kept herself safe. While she was physically fine, that had taken a mental toll.

“Still,” Freya said, changing the topic as she narrowed her eyes at the horizon, “the seas and skies here are exceptionally blue.”

“They are,” the warrior agreed. “It might even be a little bright for our Northern eyes.”

As the woman had said, their homeland was often shadowed by ashen clouds, and there were few days where the seas looked blue. While the natives wouldn't see it as particularly hot now that the worst of the season had passed, it was a completely alien heat to the visitors on the boat. Standing on the deck under the rays of the sun was enough to make them dizzy with the heat. The one saving grace was that the breeze was cooling and stopped them from struggling to breathe.

The tall warrior and the sailors tending the sails all had darkened skin, but a glance at the arms under their sleeves or the napes of their necks revealed pale coloring. The fact that Freya was the palest among them must have been because she so rarely stepped out of her cabin, or else she found it extremely difficult to tan.

The pale-skinned woman didn't take her eyes off the port as they approached. “Incredible. It's rare to see such ports even on the Northern Continent,” she mused.

“It is. I never imagined the Southern Continent would have such ports either.”

Freya merely nodded in answer to the woman's comment on needing to revisit their assumptions. The relationship between the Northern and Southern Continents was usually summed up by the phrase “Southern magic, Northern technology,” indicating that the Southern Continent was more advanced in terms of magic, and the Northern Continent boasted exceptional technology.

While it was a fundamental requirement for royalty in the Southern Continent to have lineal magic, such families were a minority in the North. The Uppasala family had hereditarily large mana reserves, but no particular lineal magic. The

types of magic they could use were the four main types alone.

On the flip side, the North was much more technologically advanced, and their shipbuilding, smithing, and architecture were all a step above. Such pride gave rise to conceit and would inevitably lead to looking down on the other side of the divide.

Noticing her thoughts stray down paths best left unexplored, Freya took a breath to recenter herself. It was at that moment that a loud cry came from the sailor on watch.

“A shadow is approaching from the stern! It’s a sea dragon!”

“Princess!” called the warrior, immediately forgetting the correct form of address.

Freya understood how foolish a correction would be at the moment and let it pass. “The storm must have blown us into its territory last night, and it has pursued us since.”

Sea dragons were a creature that didn’t exist on Earth, a hindrance to ocean travel. While there were instances on Earth of ships striking whales and being damaged, or people falling overboard during a storm and being eaten by sharks, the destruction caused by sea dragons was much more extreme.

The first difference was the sheer size of it. Compared to a heavy tanker or nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, this world’s ships might have appeared small, but they were even smaller than the biggest examples of local creatures.

In addition, sea dragons were strongly territorial and terrifyingly aggressive when something entered their domain. Aggressive enough that it was by no means uncommon for them to leave said territory in pursuit of intruders.

That said, it was an exception for them to pursue ships for more than a day.

“The stern ballista was damaged in the storm last night, Princess.”

Freya’s decision was immediate as the woman readied herself for a fight.

“Very well. A sea dragon of that size would likely be no real issue to the coastal defense force, but we were the ones to draw it here, so it would be rather rude of us. You do not need to dispose of it; merely drive it off, so do not

push yourself, Skaji.”

“As you will,” the warrior said with a salute, bringing her right fist to rest on her left breast before running off. The ship was still out of the breakwaters, so the swells were large and moved them around a fair amount, but the woman moved as if over even ground.

“Bring me my spear!” she called through the salt-laden air, and a sailor responded immediately.

“Here, Lady Victoria!”

“Excellent!” she cried, taking it off the bearded sailor as she ran by.

The spear was a little over a meter in length and was constructed entirely from an opalescent material with a slight yellowish tinge and was rather heavy for its size. The color and heft of the spear were proof that it had been carved from the tusk of a walrus. Using a normal spear with a metal tip and wooden shaft to attack a walrus or sea dragon while it was in the water was disadvantageous. The salt water would cause it to rust, and the wood would rot in the long term, but a bigger problem was that the difference in density between the metal tip, which would sink, and the wooden shaft, which floated, would warp its trajectory in the water.

“Move! I will deal with it,” the woman declared as she arrived on the afterdeck.

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

The sailors said, immediately making space.

She didn’t slow, keeping up her sprint as she kicked up off the deck, leaping up to the lookout. Then stood there, holding the spear in her right hand as she looked down at the sea dragon and muttered.

“Hmm. A small mercy... It should be possible to deal with it.”

The sea dragon’s long neck extended from its emerald back beneath the waves as it bared its fangs at her. It was of the long-necked variety, and fortunately a rather small example of the species. A larger one would have left

her needing to look *up* at the creature, so it was indeed a small mercy.

That said, the sight of it cutting through the water with its four fins, rapidly approaching the ship, was enough to make even veteran sailors falter.

“Phew...”

Keeping her eyes on the creature, the warrior gripped the spear near its tip, allowing the base of it to rest on her foot. A close look would show one that the leather shoe she wore had a circular depression in it, a perfect fit for the butt of the spear. She used her right hand to ensure that it wouldn't fall before removing said hand and leaving the spear upright on her foot.

In and of itself, the move looked like some sleight of hand, but this was no casino, and it was no mere performance.

“Whewww... Hahh...”

After several deep breaths, the warrior opened her eyes wide and kicked her leg out with flowing movements.



She kicked up, around, and then down in a move similar to a high kick in karate or kickboxing. The sequence of movements brought the spear on her foot up, put it level with the sea, and sent it flying.

Spear-kicking, an art passed down in the northern countries of the continent. There were those of the opinion that it had been attempted to compensate for the thick gloves necessary up there, and also that it had come about to make up for the strength deficit that female warriors had when compared to their male brethren in terms of the distance a spear could be flung.

Whatever the case was, it went without saying that it was no common technique. Purposefully using a foot to throw a spear was both inefficient and unrealistic. However, the accumulation of pure technique and talented wielders' practice made its efficiency rise, and the unrealistic became realistic.

The tusk flew straight through the air, faster than an arrow, before piercing the sea dragon's head. The beast let out a short, keening screech before its long neck fell to the sea.

A single shot, and a single kill, quite literally finishing off the sea dragon with one thrown spear. The creature had been large, but it was still relatively distant, so it was hardly an easy target.

"Wow!"

"That's our Lady Victoria!"

"And that's why you're Skaji the Witch!"

The observing sailors all cheered at the feat, stomping on the deck. She had both kicked a spear and hit the head, and did so strongly enough that it pierced the skull and fatally wounded the creature.

She gave a slight smile and raise of her hand to the cheering sailors before easily making her way back.

"Good work, Skaji. That was spectacular."

"Thank you, Princess. It is an honor," she answered with a slight bow of her head as she noticed Freya's approach.

"Skaji, I'm sure I have told you to call me 'captain' while on the ship," Freya

said with a reluctant smile.

The urgency had passed, so the warrior finally realized her mistake and hunched in on herself slightly. “Ah, my apologies, Captain.”

“I will only have the title for a little longer,” the princess-captain said with a relaxed expression, “so please use it while we can.”

The sailors around them laughed at that, and the warrior joined in.

“Very well, Captain,” she said. “Incidentally, what will we do with the sea dragon? We defeated it, so I believe we can stake a claim.”

As she spoke, her gaze drifted back to the ocean and the sea dragon’s corpse floating within it. The corpse was a treasure trove. It offered water-repellent leather along with strong, supple bones. The meat wasn’t particularly tasty, but it was edible, and its oils smelled good when burned, so it could be sold for a high price.

However, Freya hesitated for a moment before shaking her head. “Perhaps not. It would have caused trouble for the port if things had gone poorly, so we run the risk of inviting displeasure from the first harbor we use.”

“Understood, ma’am,” she answered, giving the carcass another longing glance.

Freya intuited the look’s meaning and gave a slight smile as she covered her mouth. “You need not worry so much, Skaji. I shall speak with them to ensure your spear is returned.”

“Thank you very much, ma’am,” the woman answered with a reddened face.

Chapter 1 — The Prince Consort Far From Home

When the message arrived from Valentia, Aura was in her office, faced with a most vexing dilemma with her secretary Fabio.

“Mrgh...”

She was seated in a wicker chair, slumped over the wooden table and holding herself up by her elbows.

“Your Majesty,” the secretary told her evenly, “however much you glare, the numbers will remain the same.”

“I am aware,” she answered, understandably sharply. In her hands were documents concerning the expenses of the raptor extermination and its reinforcements, but they were higher than she had ever expected.

It wasn’t so bad that the greatest ordinal was different, but the second was significantly higher than she had thought, and it was a painful sight regardless of how one attempted to gloss it over.

The document had been produced by the officials who worked directly for the royal family, so it was denoted in Arabic numerals. While the system was currently only in use in the departments that reported directly to her, the numerals were well-liked among those familiar with them. Once they had learned the digits, a single glance was enough to tell them the value of something. However, that ease of reading was now its downfall, as the number she wanted to forget merely leaped out at her.

“Provisions aside, I expected there to be a glut of military goods being sold cheaply,” she admitted.

“Said glut appears to have long since dried up. The merchants always react more quickly than we expect.”

The conversation between queen and secretary was less of an actual discussion and more a series of complaints and cold truths.

Suddenly, a knock came at the door, and a young soldier called out, “Excuse me, an urgent dwarf wyvern has arrived from Valentia.”

Aura had no memory of anything happening that could prompt such a thing, and a brief inquiring glance at Fabio was answered with a silent shake of his head. If such a talented, dedicated secretary had no idea, it really must have been an unexpected urgent message.

A coiling sensation was winding its way through her gut, but she would not have been fit to stand as monarch if she couldn’t deal with this type of happenstance.

“Enter,” she commanded, betraying no surprise or shock in her voice.



Approximately an hour later, Aura was leading an urgent, unofficial meeting in a small room of the palace. In attendance were Fabio, Espiridion, and Zenjirou.

While she often consulted with the first two in the case of an unexpected occurrence, Zenjirou would ordinarily never attend such a meeting. Other than public ceremonies that required multiple royals to attend, Zenjirou normally only came to the royal palace to act as her representative. As a result, it was exceedingly rare for them to see each other in the royal palace. The fact that such an unusual occurrence was taking place was plenty of evidence of the urgency of the matter.

Meetings attended by royalty were usually much more bombastic, but this was an extremely private meeting between only her closest confidants.

Aura tossed the sheet of drake parchment onto the table and immediately started with the main topic.

“A little earlier, a dwarf wyvern arrived from Valentia. Only one has come so far, so there are few specifics, but the contents themselves caused me to summon you all here now.”

Ordinarily, when sending information by dwarf wyvern, one would send several wyverns with the same message to increase the chances of a reliable delivery. Those receiving the message would also not treat it as official

information until there were at least three copies saying the same thing, in order to guard against enemy forces intercepting and controlling information.

To ignore the normal procedure, even unofficially, and share the information like this only underlined how urgent the situation was. Once Aura was sure from her confidants' solemn expressions that her message had been understood, she continued in a low, carrying voice.

"The day before yesterday, a large, four-masted ship docked in Valentia. The ship belongs to the Kingdom of Uppasala and is captained by Freya Uppasala, a young woman who calls herself the country's first princess. The governor determined that this was above their station and brought it to my attention, requesting that personnel be sent."

Her secretary's eyebrow rose at the description of the ship, his lip twisting as the elderly mage's eyes opened wide in surprise.

The only one to remain blank-faced was Zenjirou, but his lack of surprise wasn't due to strong nerves; he was simply unaware of the meaning of it all.

Recognizing that, Fabio said to the queen, "Four-masted ships are rare even on the Northern Continent. They are state of the art, and if the report is true, it lends credence to the girl's claims of being a princess."

Understanding his goal, Aura nodded. "Indeed, such ships are the domain of the biggest countries, and even three-masted vessels are only privately owned by wealthy merchants. Therefore it is almost inevitable that the captain of such a ship would be royalty. Naturally, I am unsure of the validity of it being such a young woman."

The mix of agreement and explication complete, Aura turned to the elderly mage and asked him the most pressing question.

"I am unfortunately unaware of a country by this name. Espiridion, are you?"

The other two men turned their attention to the mage as well. There was a general image of skilled mages being wise, but that wasn't necessarily the case. There were sages who were not blessed with deep pools of mana or innate talent in its manipulation, and also mages who could do as they willed with mana, but due to dedicating themselves solely to magic, knew surprisingly little

about anything else.

Fortunately, Espiridion fit the world's classic image of a wise mage. He frowned, making his long eyebrows quiver, before replying consideringly.

"Let me see... Unfortunately, I lack the detailed knowledge you wish for, but if my memory is correct, the country is situated far to the north of the continent," he informed her with an apologetic incline of his head, only able to give her a rough idea of the country's location.

However, it was impressive he knew even that much. Considering both the volume of information and the size of the world, it was hardly surprising. It was like asking someone during *Sakoku* in Japan about a country in Southeast Asia. Simply knowing the name was a sign of extensive knowledge.

"A northern country in the Northern Continent. It is hardly surprising not to have heard of it, then. The question of why they would come here still remains."

Despite Aura's question, there was no one there who could answer her. Trade between the two continents was not particularly profitable. On top of that, the countries that did do so were the northern countries of the Southern Continent and the southern countries of the Northern Continent.

Capua was situated almost exactly in the middle in terms of its north/south location, so the kingdom rarely dealt with the Northern Continent's ships directly. Any intercontinental trade that took place was done through intermediary ports to the north. Even those northern countries on this continent that did trade intercontinentally rarely came as far south as Capua, yet a country from even farther north had sent a four-masted ship.

"Direct trade with the Northern Continent is one of our ambitions, and we cannot let such a chance slip by, but they must have their own agenda," Fabio added. "I imagine that pushing our own hopes through will be a difficult piece of negotiation indeed."

Aura nodded at the secretary's words before answering. "True. We must first ascertain their identity. I cannot discount the possibility of someone posing as royalty, but if we do not treat them as such, it will be most impolite if they truly are. We must avoid treating them impolitely whilst also not taking everything

they say at face value. It will be a difficult balance to strike.”

“Your Majesty, if I may add something?” Espiridion interjected. “In the case of the Northern Continent, royals with no lineal magic of their own are not uncommon. In fact, I have heard that many of their royal families have no lineal magic to begin with.”

“Hmm, I see,” she answered with a furrowed brow at his warning.

Capua’s only ties with the Northern Continent were slight, borne through trade, so they knew little of the culture and practices there. It was like the daimyo carrying out the Nanban trade during the Warring States period being aware of which countries were Protestant and which were Catholic.

The concept of royalty being incapable of using lineal magic in the Northern Continent was unthinkable to Aura. In the Southern Continent, lineal magic was seen as the quickest way to prove one’s royal status. However, without that tactic, proving royal lineage would be an endeavor in itself.

“The negotiator will need to be even more highly skilled than usual. Who can we entrust such a burden to? Your Majesty, have you any thoughts?” Fabio asked, speaking his mind plainly for once.

“I do,” Aura nodded. “If there are no objections, I intend to appoint Rafaello Márquez to the role.”

The three men all started at the name.

“Lord Rafaello?” Fabio asked. “There are certainly no concerns about his capability, but he is part of the Márquez family, is he not?”

The statement was simple, but the meaning behind it was vast. There were two problems with his appointment: the fact that Marquis Márquez possessed his own lands and the fact that Valentia was under the direct control of the royal family.

The governor was emplaced to act on behalf of the monarchy and as a general rule was a noble of the robe, with no lands of their own. The exceptions were ministers of the royal palace and generals in the army who would have a direct influence on statecraft.

Naturally, it was a cultural norm, not a law, and the monarch's decision could overturn it, but that would also lead to rebellion from said nobles of the cloth.

Aura herself was aware of that fact. She remained upright in her chair and crossed her arms in front of her chest.

"I know. Raffaello will not be the envoy himself but rather an assistant to the envoy. Publicly, the envoy will be sent on my own expense, which should avoid provoking the nobles of the cloth. Of course, the bulk of the duties will be on Raffaello," she declared confidently.

"I see. However, such an envoy must be sufficient, at least in name, to convey the weight of such a position, must they not?" Fabio asked, although he was already near-certain of her intent, shooting a glance at Zenjirou, who had remained silent thus far.

Regardless of his wisdom, or lack thereof, Zenjirou could see where the discussion was going as well. *Ah, I wondered why I'd been summoned to an unofficial meeting. That's how it's going down, then.*

Aura intended to install Raffaello Márquez as an assistant envoy, which was not an official position. This had the advantage of not contravening unwritten laws by allowing him to command freely, but it was also a rather unstable position.

To put it another way, it was like being a private secretary. Such a role would not be enough to tempt the Márquez heir, even temporarily, into taking the post, but depending on *whose* secretary it was, the worth of the position changed.

In terms of people who would have no complaint about the heir being a secretary, the Márquez family was important enough that only royalty would be sufficient. Disregarding Aura, the only adult royal in Capua was Zenjirou.

He had been able to see exactly where things were heading, but that was why he had remained silent. While the only people there were Aura's confidants, it was still better for him to avoid proactively nominating himself for the job. The kindly old man aside, the narrow-faced secretary had been sending purposeful glances his way the entire time, and he would definitely not overlook any carelessness on Zenjirou's part.

Whether she was aware of his considerations or not, Aura looked directly at him for the first time and slowly spoke. “The only people that Rafaello Márquez would have no complaints about assisting would-be royals. I could feasibly take command myself, but even with teleportation magic making it only a day’s trip, I am wary of cutting myself off from the capital.”

Even with her teleportation magic, working so far from home would lead to information from the capital not reaching her quickly. Although they were not at war, it was only recently that the last war had ended, so there was no guarantee that nothing unforeseen would come up.

Besides, Aura was an accomplished stateswoman and negotiator, so if she was going herself, there would be no need for an assistant. No matter how one looked at it, this was all moving towards giving Zenjirou the role.

Ordinarily, Aura would never have been so indirect during an unofficial meeting with her confidants, nor during a conversation in the inner palace with her husband, but with both of these matters coming together, she needed to talk along the subject itself to gain their understanding.

Without taking her eyes off Zenjirou, she offered her conclusion. “Thus, you are all that is left, Zenjirou.”

When his name was called, he had managed to ready himself enough to avoid being shocked. “I am?” he asked. “Of course, if you order it then I have no objection.”

The queen gave a slightly exaggerated frown at his preprepared answer. “Oh? Do you have concerns? Speak them.”

They were most definitely a harmonious pairing of husband and wife. There had been no meeting or planning, but their conversation was almost scripted.

“Yes, I am currently appointed to entertain Prince Francesco and Princess Bona from the Twin Kingdoms. I am merely concerned about what is to happen there.”

“Indeed, it does do them a slight disservice. I will take up the mantle on that front. While I will not be able to meet with them as frequently as you have, we will need to compromise.”

“Very well, then I shall offer my apologies to them directly.”

“I would appreciate that.”

The tone of their discussion was very different from their normal conversations in the inner palace—this was a discussion between superior and subordinate. Still, conversations changed, even when they were between the same people, depending on whether it was a private or official conversation, so it didn’t feel particularly out of place to Zenjirou.

“However, if I am the envoy, will that not also cause the nobles of the cloth to rebel? Is there no one suitable among them?”

Zenjirou had initially had no interest in official affairs and shut himself away in the inner palace. However, recently, he had been spending more time in the royal palace, meeting with Francesco and Bona. If he were to act as Aura’s representative and go to one of the royal holdings, it would likely lead to many distrustful people speaking out.

Aura shook her head bluntly in answer. “There is no need to worry about that. Strictly speaking, there are people with suitable abilities, but they are already in positions those abilities are suitable for. To put it another way, you are the only one who can be away from the royal palace for an extended period without having too deleterious an effect on any business.”

Put more bluntly, it was akin to saying that he did the least work. It was a position he had intentionally taken up, but it was still a shock to hear it directly from his wife.

“I see...” he said, a momentary flash of pain on his face. Nevertheless, excluding emotional concerns, all of his issues had been addressed, so he quickly marshaled himself and bowed from his seat, following the lessons in manners he had been given. “Very well, then, I shall exert my meager talents to their fullest to carry out your orders.”

“I am counting on it,” the queen answered with a grand nod, accepting her husband’s loyalty.



“I’m sorry!” were the first words out of Aura’s mouth as they returned to

their living room in the inner palace that evening.

The words themselves were a blunt apology utterly without context, but Zenjirou knew what she was apologizing for.

“It’s fine. You couldn’t avoid making the decision without giving me any warning about it, right? I *do* want an explanation, though,” he answered with his normal smile, sitting on the sofa.

He had been called up to the royal palace out of the blue and immediately told he would be moved to one of their remote properties for a time without his family. He didn’t doubt her faithfulness to him, but he still needed to hear the details. However much you trusted someone, having them arbitrarily decide your future was not a pleasant feeling.

“I will, of course, explain,” she told him, taking a seat opposite her husband. Her posture as she sat was very different than usual; she had her hands resting in her lap in what could be described as a somewhat apologetic, meek position. It even seemed like she was ever so slightly hunched over.

Zenjirou didn’t particularly think the topic warranted such behavior but kept his thoughts to himself as he asked his question. “So, honestly, is it Rafaello Márquez or me that you want to send?”

The question wasn’t based on a new feeling of doubt; it was something that had come to mind after an in-depth consideration of the conversation. She hadn’t expected him to bring the topic up, and her eyes widened in surprise before she answered.

“You.”

“I figured,” Zenjirou said with a nod and sigh. “I thought it was strange once I’d considered it. If they’re royalty from the Northern Continent, I’d have expected you to invite them to the capital and welcome them, yet you’re saying that we’re short of manpower and sending both a man talented enough to be considered for your husband and one of only two adult royals.”

With the almost illogical distribution of people, while there was certainly a simpler method, even Zenjirou could tell there was more to the story than there appeared to be.

“Indeed, my first consideration when I became aware was to head to Valentia myself and personally take command of the situation.”

“My, Your Majesty! Think of your position!” he couldn’t help but quip at the unexpected statement.

His reaction was roughly what she had expected, as she simply nodded once. “It is, of course, impossible. Therefore, I consider sending you to be the next best option,” she replied, some of her usual tone coming back into her voice.

“Well, I can tell how important it is to you from your passion, but why didn’t you want to invite the so-called princess and her retinue to the capital?”

“Well, before I explain, I need to ensure you have the necessary background knowledge. Zenjirou, do you know who the person currently responsible for Valentia is?”

“Umm...” he began, dredging up the memories of his lessons from Octavia where he had learned about the general state of the country. “I’m pretty sure it’s the Duke or Duchess of Valentia, which is you right now, yeah?”

She nodded in satisfaction at his answer. “Indeed. Areas under the royal family’s direct control are commonly referred to as the crown lands. However, the only lands actually defined as royal territory outside of the capital are several small resorts. The other “crown lands” are individual demesnes with their own attached ranks, and anyone who inherits the rank will become the lord of that area. The only difference from normal territories is that the right to name the successor lies not with the holder of the rank themselves, but with the monarch.”

In essence, while a normal fiefdom would pass from father to son through the generations, these “crown lands” and their related ranks would be assigned by the reigning monarch. Therefore, that monarch could install a close relative as the next lord. Naturally, they could also select themselves, and that was how strategic locations like Valentia were often held by the ruler in addition to their royal rank.

Zenjirou was aware of the circumstances but didn’t quite see how it linked to not inviting the group to the capital. Seeing the puzzlement on his face, Aura offered a more detailed explanation.

“In this case, the important factor is that the capital is part of the kingdom itself, while Valentia is a full fiefdom under my direct control. Individual fiefs have significant independence, and as long as they pay their taxes to the crown, they are free from interference from the country itself under most circumstances.”

This independence was an inconvenience to the royal family, so Aura was working on methods to decrease the influence of the various nobles at the heads of those regions, although in this particular instance, it was something of a boon.

“Oh, is it something like the group entering the capital brings them under the jurisdiction of the kingdom, while them staying in Valentia means they are only under the royal family’s?” Zenjirou asked, clapping his hands in realization.

“Precisely,” she said, nodding. “Ordinarily a feudal lord would be strictly forbidden from engaging in diplomacy with foreign powers without the consent of the crown, but as royalty, we are exceptions. In essence, dealing with this self-proclaimed princess as the Duchess of Valentia would enable me to build relations while keeping domestic interference to a minimum.”

“I get it,” Zenjirou answered, finally feeling that he had a general understanding of the situation.

The monarch placing the benefits to the royal family over the benefits to the country was not a particularly appropriate act, but there were occasions when such things were unavoidable. A feudalistic kingdom was formed in large part through a power balance between the royal family and each feudal lord. Simply strengthening the nation as a whole could lead to a relative decrease in the monarch’s power and ultimately spell rebellion. The monarch had to enable their country to prosper while still maintaining the power to suppress the powerful nobles if need be.

“Got it, then. I can see why you want to deal with them there in Valentia. I guess you see a lot of potential for a beneficial negotiation with them.”

“I can, and it’s more than just the potential, it is practically inevitable. As we said earlier, it is extremely rare that boats come directly to us from the Northern Continent. Despite that, they have done so, and they will either have

a specific goal to accomplish with us or else they have had some unfortunate accident.”

“Huh? It’s not possible they just felt like it? Like they didn’t come directly to us but stopped at a more northern port and then came down here as well?”

“No, it is not possible. While we are not necessarily allies with the northern countries, we maintain friendly or at least neutral relations with them. If the ship had decided to come here after visiting one of their ports, there would have been a report from that country before its arrival.”

“I see,” Zenjirou replied before she continued.

“If they arrived purposefully then there will be plenty of scope for diplomacy, and if it was accidental, the day is ours. An accident will likely have damaged the ship sufficiently to require repairs. Four-masted ship or not, they will be unlikely to have sufficient shipwrights to do so under their own power. Therefore, we will certainly be offering manpower to repair the vessel, which provides a unique chance to gain insight into the cutting-edge shipbuilding of their continent.”

As she spoke, a wide smile befitting the ruler of such a large country made its way onto her lips, and she wet them with her tongue.

“So your main goal is improving our ships?”

“It is. There are other areas in which they have advanced further than us as well, such as mass production of furnaces for the smelting of metal on a large scale, but the initial goal is larger ships. Once we have those, we can send our own traders to the Northern Continent.”

The royal ambition shone in her eyes as Zenjirou rained on her parade. “Buuut, will it go that well? I don’t know the details, but reproducing the results of long-time innovation like larger ships must also have other techniques that are prerequisites.”

Progress wasn’t so easy that getting their hands on a single example would immediately allow them to be able to replicate it. For example, an intelligent person might be able to disassemble a carriage and understand its structure. However, even with that knowledge, they would not be able to create the

carriage from scratch. The carriage was an amalgamation of many techniques. The wheels needed to be built uniformly, the axles needed to be straight and round and connected to the carriage in such a way that they wouldn't slide but would still freely rotate. All of those techniques also had to be learned before one could put a carriage together from the raw materials, and ships were much the same.

"Your concerns are valid, but we do have a certain quality of shipwright domestically. I would like to think that the technology is neither irreplacable nor unintelligible," Aura answered after giving it some thought.

"All right, I get the general gist of it. I won't be able to get in contact with you easily once I'm there, though, so I'd like you to make notes on our exact priorities and what I can promise them, and so on. Is that okay?"

"It is. Ordinarily, I would hesitate to allow such secret information to remain in written form, but in your case, no one else will be able to read your writing so there should be no issue."

"Thanks, I'll keep the numbers in kanji too, just in case."

Writing things down normally meant it was possible for one's negotiations to be seen by a third party or even the target of those negotiations themselves. Arabic numerals were gradually becoming known among the officials who worked in the palace, so a slight risk existed there, but there was no one else in the world who could read Japanese.

"In that case, what would I prioritize?"

"Naturally, when considering the boats..."

The two of them put their heads together and talked for a long time, filling around a dozen sheets of copy paper with an ordered list of what Aura wanted from the talks and what Zenjiro could promise on his own.

Naturally, the norm was for negotiations to stray significantly from such preparations, but going in with a plan still made a surprising amount of difference. Zenjiro in particular had a tendency borne from his past employment to create detailed plans, given his lack of ad-libbing skills and cautious disposition.

“Right, that’s about all I can think of for now,” he finally said, stretching in his seat with a crack of his joints as he returned his ballpoint to the table.

Aura couldn’t resist a smile at the sight of her husband’s satisfaction with having finished their work when she realized there was something she needed to tell him and corrected her posture. “Zenjirou,” she prompted.

“Hm? What?”

“I need to apologize. I have burdened you once again with the national interest,” she told him with a slight inclination of her head in his direction. It was certainly somewhat late for her to tell him that, but all she could do was lower her head.

Aura had originally promised him that as long as it did not harm the national interest, she would grant him all that she could. She hadn’t exactly *broken* that promise, but she couldn’t help but feel apologetic for constantly shifting the burden of national interest onto him.

“Uh, oh yeah,” he answered. He was going to continue with comments about it not being her fault and there being no other choice, but he had a sudden thought.

Hm, now that I think about it, haven’t I been saying exactly that for ages and yet my workload gradually gets heavier and heavier?

It was nothing worth actively complaining about, though. He might have had various duties in the royal palace during the day, but he always had the leeway in his schedule to return to the inner palace at lunchtime, and he had at least one day in every five to laze around doing nothing.

Above all, with the lack of nighttime illumination in this world, there was no concept of late-night overtime. Once the sun set, more or less, that was the end of work, so from Zenjirou’s perspective, there were no great demands on his time.

However, while at home, he could always spend time with his beloved wife in the inner palace after work, surrounded by his household comforts. Leaving for Valentia on his own meant that he would be separated from both his appliances and wife, as well as his son, Carlos Zenkichi. That was something he could bear

for a short period, but he had the feeling that if he waved it off with the excuse of there being no choice, it would have a bigger influence on how things went in the future.

Maintaining as gentle an expression as he could, he replied with words chosen to be as far from harsh as he could manage. “Well, I get that you didn’t have a choice with your position, but this is a little much. I couldn’t refuse before I even knew about it; it was a real surprise.”

With his usual responses being variations on “don’t worry about it,” the change in his answer was a significant shock to her. A moment later, she noticed her own train of thought, and her cheeks were dyed red with shame.

I truly am despicable, doing this whilst expecting unconditional forgiveness with a simple apology, she thought to herself. If her husband were anyone else, the incident facing them would have likely been dealt with by inviting the self-proclaimed princess’s group to the capital. Despite that, Aura had instantly decided upon seeing the contents of the missive that she would deal with it all in Valentia and reap the benefits for the royal family.

She didn’t think that the decision itself was a mistake, but it meant that she had come to see it as a given that Zenjirou would go along with anything she said without question.

Otherwise, this would not be such a shock, she told herself, deep regret pulling at her expression as she faced him.

“Indeed. I truly do apologize. I erred greatly on this occasion. While things are going in the best direction they can, that is due to you answering my hopes despite saying nothing to you until the last moment. Thank you, truly. I cannot promise that similar situations will not happen in the future, but I shall discuss things with you as much as I am able to. Additionally, once this incident is laid to rest, I wish to reward you in some tangible way. You do not need to decide immediately, but would you think of something?”

“Ah, yeah, I will,” he agreed, albeit haltingly.

One of the reasons for the acceleration of her coming to depend on him was certainly due to him accepting no reward. It was only now that Zenjirou was starting to understand that, and he thought briefly.

“Something I want... Hmm...”

But even considering how many times Aura had asked him that, nothing came to mind. Zenjirou had never been a particularly material person, and the fact that after only a few years of office work he had amassed savings of three million yen only proved that.

Part of it was that he had been too busy working to actually spend his money but being so busy also meant that he hadn't had the time to cook for himself either. The vast majority of his diet had consisted of ready meals or takeout. Managing to save so much despite the outgoings on even a second-hand car and his lifestyle was because he had no other hobbies that would use up money.

Now this was a whole other world, and Zenjirou mostly spent his time in the inner and royal palaces, so he didn't even know about enough things to want them, and that was certainly due to his current lifestyle not feeling like too much of a burden.

At a loss, he replied to her with a question instead. “Hey, actually, what's the normal thing you would give in this kind of situation?”

The queen looked up in thought at his question. “Let me see. The easiest would be money. Middle-and lower-class nobles would often be paid directly with gold or silver, while higher-class nobles and royalty would generally land either a title or residence, along with a guarantee of periodic income,” she answered smoothly.

Zenjirou's reaction, however, was not enthusiastic. “Hmm, money, huh? Honestly, it's probably better if I don't have money that I can use without going through you.”

He didn't have a particularly good opinion of his own abilities, but he also didn't evaluate his personality too well either. He wasn't sure that if he made some mistake in the future that could be smoothed over with money, he wouldn't give in to the temptation.

In addition to money not being something he had any real desire for, it was also risky. At the very least, it wasn't something he wanted to leap for at this exact moment. He postponed his decision and asked for more information.

“Anything else?”

“There is also the gift of an object directly. Ordinarily, it would be something related to the individual’s achievement. Someone who had great martial achievements might receive an excellent bow or spear. A civil official might receive an engraved drake-bone pen or a beautiful set of calculating stones.”

A drake-bone pen was exactly as the name implied, a pen carved from the bone of a drake. It was a type of dip-pen and shaped, so a cavity in the bone would take in a supply of ink. Structurally, it was similar to a Japanese glass pen.

The calculating stones were also, as the name implied, a primitive calculation tool. Ten ridges were engraved across the fronts and backs of flat stones like those used in the game of Go, and depending on how they were placed, you could represent the numbers one to ten. The highly educated in this world could use multiple stones to carry out the four basic arithmetic operations, but Zenjirou didn’t know how. It had been the subject of one of his lessons with Octavia, but he barely remembered.

“Pens or stones, huh? Not exactly something I’m into.”

His lack of interest was no real surprise. From a purely utilitarian perspective, those drake-bone pens were inferior to ballpoints, and calculating stones hardly measured up to a calculator or the spreadsheet app on his PC. The objects would naturally have their own worth as finely sculpted works of art, but Zenjirou didn’t have much aesthetic sense and wasn’t much of a collector, so his reaction would just be along the lines of, “Huh, that’s pretty.”

He kept that for consideration, though. It wasn’t something he would hesitate to take, nor would it cause issues if he did, so it could be a good compromise. Regardless, he asked for more, just in case.

“Anything else?”

“I suppose permission to marry. The highest nobles require the monarch’s permission. In the majority of cases, it is nothing more than a formality, but there are circumstances where it would not be allowed, such as two high noble families merging or when there is a large difference in status between the bride and groom’s families. In that case, the difference in status or the detriment the union would cause to the royal family can be overcome with achievements in

either military or civil areas.”

“And that’s *definitely* not something I want,” Zenjirou replied instantaneously.

Aura couldn’t help a smile at her husband’s immediate reminder. “Well, you say that for now. Another choice would be to simply award you a woman as recompense. The woman, in this case, would not be a titled one to become your wife, but more of a dancer or singer, with beautiful looks and a figure to match.”

Zenjirou gave a slightly aggrieved look at her dispassionate recital before sighing. “I don’t want one.”

The brief phrase completely summed up Zenjirou’s feelings. Naturally, he was a healthy man in mind and body, so there were times when he was attracted to women other than his wife. However, that was more of a temptation than a real desire to bring other women into his “family” in the inner palace.

The queen gave a slightly chagrined smile at his unchanging stubbornness towards the topic. “I see. Well, those are the common rewards that come to mind. So? Did it help?”

Zenjirou scratched at his head with a pinched expression as he answered. “Yeah, well, I guess? Yup, if I can’t think of anything else, I’ll probably take the drake-bone pen or the calculation stones.”

Aura’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “Oh-hoh? Did they pique your interest?” she asked.

However, it was not to be, and Zenjirou’s answer was contrary to her expectations. “Nah, it’s more like they’re the least risky,” he told her bluntly.

Aura couldn’t restrain a sigh. “Then it is hardly a reward...”

Her husband was perfectly happy to enable her to fulfill the duty of granting him some visible reward, but it was not something he desired himself. On top of that, he was also taking care that it would be in the way least likely to cause an uproar.

Aura pressed her right index finger and thumb against her temples as if fighting off a headache before speaking somewhat admonishingly. “Zenjirou,

there is no need for the recipient to pay any mind to friction the reward would cost. If you truly chose something that would be a problem for the country, I would overrule it. You can simply ask for whatever you want. Is there nothing you desire? You supported yourself when you lived in your original world—what kind of items did you buy there? I doubt you were so destitute that you could afford only the necessities.”

It was Zenjirou’s turn to cast his eyes to the ceiling in thought. “Back when I was in Japan... Hmm. I wasn’t struggling for money, no, but I guess I was destitute in terms of time. I didn’t have a chance to try and really get anything. I guess there were a fair few things I did want, though, maybe?”

In retrospect, when he had transitioned from studying to employment, there had been several things he had wanted. A wristwatch, for example. He owned two, a digital watch for his own time and an analog one that went with his suit, but both were relatively cheap affairs, less than ten thousand yen apiece. He had wanted one with another zero on the price tag at some point. He’d also wanted a new car.

He had bought a used hybrid after about six months at work, but it was a compromise. There were other cars he wanted solely because they were cool or the like, but the overwhelming fuel efficiency had made him compromise with the hybrid.

He commuted to work on the train (there was no parking at the office) and transported his daily necessities on his bike (his rented parking was farther than the stores he used), so the car was practically unused, considering his lifestyle, and yet he was still loath to surrender it, so it was definitely something he cared about.

The only other thing that came to mind was a season ticket for the team in the J league he supported. It wasn’t something that he’d been unable to afford, but the huge levels of overtime meant that he’d not had a chance to go and watch a match, so he hadn’t bothered.

Regardless, although he could think of several things, none of them would be of any use in this world. “Eh, I can’t think of anything. There were things I wanted in my own world, but none of them are things I need, considering my

lifestyle here. Honestly, I've not seen anything in this world that makes me think I *have* to have them," he said with an exaggerated shrug, the palms of his hands facing the ceiling as he gave up.

Even knowing it was said from the heart, it still worried Aura. "Hm... Is there truly nothing? I do not mind if it is realistic or not, I just want to know what you wish for."

"I don't know what to tell you. I honestly feel pretty free here. I might be a bit busier with work these days, but I still have plenty of free time and plenty of games and DVDs to kill time with. If I had to pick *something*, I'd love an internet connection, but that's not going to happen."

He had talked with Aura about being able to use time reversal and world transfer spells to connect to the internet, even if for only a short time, but she had said it was impossible. Time reversal was an object-targeted rather than an area-targeted spell, and the world transfer was instantaneous rather than sustained, so Zenjirou's idea of rewinding an area so the stars were right for it and then using the world transfer spell to connect to a Wi-Fi hotspot was not feasible.

Honestly, he wasn't entirely sold on her explanation and had some intuitive feeling that there was some way it could be managed. However, that was something to look into once he had a better understanding of space-time magic. It was far beyond his current abilities, considering he had only just learned his second related spell.

The two of them sat in silence, having nowhere to go in their conversation. Every time the topic came up, the result was the same, both of them lost for words. However, Zenjirou hated the silence and forced the conversation on to another topic.

"Anyway, it's my first time leaving the royal palace—hell, the capital, even, so I might find something I want there."

"Indeed, it may be a good change of pace from that perspective. Valentia is a pleasant place. The sun may shine strongly, but the sea breeze makes it cooler than the capital, and the seafood is superb. Of course, no matter how much you like the place, I can hardly give you the duchy."

Zenjirou chuckled in response to her joke as well. “Aha ha, I know that. I wouldn’t even suggest it.”

“Also, you are not to bring this self-proclaimed princess back here. Whether her status is true or not, it would be rather troublesome.”

“You don’t need to worry,” he told her, gentle laughter finally starting to sound between them.



Several days later, Zenjirou was meeting with Francesco and Bona in the royal palace. Their chat was progressing as it always did, with bright sunlight filling the room, the two groups sitting opposite each other on sofas as they drank chilled tea and dried fruits.

The difference from the norm was the contents of the conversation: it was a temporary farewell.

“Ah, I heard the rumors. You’re going away from the capital, then, Your Majesty?” the blond prince said as he carefully returned the teacup to the table after Zenjirou personally informed them that he would be going to Valentia.

“It is quite a shock. I will be praying for your safe return,” Bona said, the chestnut-haired princess unable to hide her surprise, her fingers twining unconsciously together on her lap.

Francesco was surprised and yet didn’t show it, while Bona was just as surprised and it was clear on her face.

The difference between them was partially to do with their individual levels of mental resilience, but it was also a matter of the difference in their positions. For Francesco, Zenjirou’s absence was like a fun guy to hang around with being away, while for Bona it meant the loss of her greatest collaborator in minding the prince and was almost a life-and-death situation.

Francesco’s behavior on a daily basis, whether an act or not, was certainly a nuisance. Bona was the one who smoothed over a lot of that nuisance, and Zenjirou had become her greatest ally in doing so. It was no surprise that the princess had teary eyes. The younger girl’s soulful look tugged at his heartstrings for a moment, but he wasn’t rash enough to let that rule him.

“Thank you. It is my first time away as well, so I am truthfully somewhat nervous,” he told them, managing to respond while keeping a gentle expression on his face. Understandably, though, regardless of how good the response was, if the person you were responding to didn’t follow along, it was wasted effort.

“Lucky you, Your Majesty. Make sure to bring souvenirs,” Francesco said, speaking easily like a child wheedling a father going on a business trip.

“Prince Francesco!” Bona scolded, flushing.

It was an everyday occurrence, but Bona still took the bait, either due to her extreme diligence or else simply because she was oversensitive. Still, however familiar the behavior was, it was a breach of etiquette, so it was possibly for the best that the prince constantly had someone rebuking him, although it was almost certainly detrimental to her mental state to be so wary around the clock.

“Well, Princess Bona, this is an informal chat, so you need not be too formal. Very well, I shall endeavor to find something that would be to your liking, Prince Francesco. The city is a port, now that I think of it, so while there may not be a full industry around it, I believe there are fine pieces of coral or well-formed pearls. I will return with one if I am able.”

Francesco smiled joyfully and cheered. “Really?! Please do! Man, I’m looking forward to it already.”

Coral and pearls were both treasures far removed from those available in a landlocked country like the Twin Kingdoms. It was no surprise at all that Francesco, a top-class enchanter *and* a top-class jeweler, would be excited about new jewels like that.

It was doubly the case for the chestnut-haired princess next to him, who dedicated herself even more to the craft of jewelery.

“Prince Francesco, however informal this is, please refrain from speaking so lightly,” she said out of obligation before turning to Zenjirou, her eyes sparkling with desire. “A-Allow me to add my own thanks, Your Majesty. Coral requires quite a familiarization to work with, and pearls are not suited for acting as magic tools, but their brilliance and shape make them superb for decoration. I am sure Prince Francesco will create something wonderful from them.”

What she said made it sound like it was a simple repetition of Francesco's thanks, but the gleam in her eyes and how she spoke the words was enough that Zenjirou could hardly miss the implication.

"Indeed, I would be glad to see this creation when it is complete. That is the case for both of your creations, of course," he answered, making it clear that souvenirs would be forthcoming for both Francesco and Bona.

"Th-Thank you!" the princess exclaimed, lowering her head quickly enough to send the sparkling silver dust scattering from her chestnut hair.



It was several more days before Zenjirou was to leave for Valentia.

The reason for those extra days was simple: before sending Zenjirou, who would be playing the leading role, they had to send the necessary people to prepare for his arrival.

Aura had sufficient mana to cast teleportation several times in a day, but her mana was also a trump card for the country, and having her without mana, even for a day, was a significant risk.

Therefore, she had used teleportation to send one person each day.

"Are you ready, Zenjirou? I would like to send you immediately."

Zenjirou put down his rucksack at her question and opened it up.

"Wait a minute. I just want to do a final check," he told her. "Uhh, hand-cranked flashlight... Check. Multitool... Check. Spirits for a gift..."

The bulk of his luggage was items he had brought from Earth.

He could acquire clothes and other necessities in Valentia if need be, and such things as his full dress uniform that weren't attainable had already been taken there. If the worst should come to pass, he could simply arrive with nothing but the clothes on his back.

"...check. All right, I've got everything," he said, cinching it up again and letting it hang from his hand.

Zenjirou was currently wearing his third formal dress. He was currently in the

inner palace alone with Aura, but when he was teleported, he would be received by several high officials, including the governor, so he needed to look the part.

He couldn't actually wear his rucksack on his back with these clothes, as it would make the outfit, similar to a kimono as it was, hang strangely on his frame, and even if it didn't, it would be rude. On that note, walking around with the bag dangling from his hand wasn't particularly polite either, but he'd just have to get them to overlook it.

His wife looked at him intently as he hefted the bag and stood in front of her again before slowly beginning to speak. "I shall send you to Valentia now. Rafaello Márquez is already there, so use him for any public business. He lacks decisiveness, but he is exceptionally skilled in carrying out orders."

Rafaello Márquez was the name of one of the two former candidates for Aura's hand in marriage. Naturally, Zenjirou wasn't particularly well-disposed towards him.

"Got it, I'm pretty much a figurehead, so I'm sure all the details will go through Lord Rafaello," he said expressionlessly.

Seeing him push down the conflicted feelings over having to rely on someone who had originally been a candidate to be his wife's husband, Aura smiled and gave him a nod.

"That is acceptable. Remember, you are royalty, and he is a retainer, so use him at your convenience."

"Right, it's honestly a little beyond what I'm used to, but I'll do my best."

When Zenjirou had been employed back home, he had never had subordinates, so making use of other people was outside of his work experience. Aura was right, though; he was royalty now and couldn't just play it off as not being good at doing so, particularly because he had to play the role of a talentless and unmotivated royal, so "leaving it to others" was likely to become a valuable skill.

"Ines from the maids of the inner palace is also in Valentia. The estate has maids of its own, but I doubt they will be to your standards. Regardless, this is

your first sojourn away from the inner palace, so for both your mind and health, stay with Ines as much as possible,” Aura advised.

Zenjiro’s stance towards service staff was, for this world, utterly at odds with the norm. It was unsurprising for most people from a modern society, but Zenjiro could not relax when a servant was waiting wordlessly in the room.

The only people aware of his feelings on this were the maids working in the inner palace. If it was just the maids, he could probably bear with it, but this would be the first time he would have to live without his modern conveniences. The fact that the worst of the heat had passed for the year was his one saving grace, but it would probably be tougher to live without the AC, fridge, and fan than he was prepared for.

“Regardless, stay with Ines, and leave your private requests to her, and nothing bad should happen. Conversely, if Ines says it is not possible, then that is the case. It is likely a needless concern, but I would appreciate you refraining from selfishness.”

If anything, Zenjiro usually went out of his way to demand as little as possible, let alone anything that could be called selfish, so saying that to him felt like a discourtesy, but she did so anyway just to be safe. There would be things he had grown accustomed to from his current lifestyle that would be utterly unattainable in Valentia, and even Zenjiro might unintentionally bother the maids with his requests in those circumstances.

“Got it, I’ll behave as best I can,” he told her, slightly taken aback by the repeated insistence to stay with Ines. But there was no point in probing deeper, so he simply answered in agreement.

This would be his first time truly being cut off from his modern civilization appliances, pushing him into the natural lifestyle of this world, so Zenjiro saw it as her possibly worrying about that.

“You have your notes? If nothing else, ensure that you do not lose them. Once you arrive, there will be almost no way to remain in contact. Even dwarf wyverns cannot deliver a letter within a day.”

The notes Zenjiro had suggested contained what Aura wanted from the self-proclaimed princess and her retinue, along with what Zenjiro himself could

promise on his own authority, ordered by priority. It was, of course, all written in Japanese, so even if it should fall into someone else's hands, it wouldn't cause an incident.

"Yup, it's in here," he told her, patting his rucksack. "I've memorized it too, pretty much, just in case."

The two of them had now run out of words to say and simply stood there watching each other silently. They had said all they needed to, and all that remained was for Aura to send him to Valentia with her teleportation magic. Even so, neither of them said anything for a time, maintaining the silence.

The couple had lived together since Zenjirou's arrival. Even knowing that they would be reunited when the incident at hand was dealt with, the sorrow of parting remained.

"Aura..." Zenjirou ventured, breaking the silence and stretching an arm out to his red-clad wife, softly embracing her.

"Mm..." Aura replied, understanding his goal with no further prompting and following his hand into his chest.

They touched each other, held each other, and kissed.



Their arms entwined around each other's backs as they hugged tightly, the kiss continuing.

"Mmm..."

"Mh, mm, mmmm..."

Knowing that he would be unable to savor this feeling for at least a little while, Zenjirou was reluctant to part. The deep kiss and embrace were different from their usual light touches, and eventually, they both slowly separated.

"I'll be off, then," he finally said, picking up his bag from where he had dropped it, his expression firm this time. Still, his left hand remained regrettably on her shoulder, clear proof that he would miss her.

Aura's smile remained on her face as she used her right hand to gently lift his from her shoulder before placing his palm in front of his chest.

"Very well, I shall begin," she answered, closing her eyes and concentrating deeply.

Immense waves of mana started to come off her body. Zenjirou unconsciously closed his eyes as well and waited for the moment. The chant from his wife's lips reached his ears as he stood there.

"Send all things in the space that I envision to the place that I desire. As compensation, I offer—"

Force, neither hot nor oppressive but still clearly there engulfed Zenjirou, and a moment later, dizziness assailed him, and he reflexively opened his eyes.

"It is good to see you, Sir Zenjirou."

The sight that greeted him was not Aura, but unfamiliar men kneeling before him.

"Welcome to Valentia. It is an honor, Your Majesty."

Chapter 2 — Princess of the Sea, Freya

“Whoa, it really was a teleport...” Zenjirou marveled as he looked out of the window.

He had been shown to his private room once he was done exchanging casual greetings with the local nobles, starting with the governor currently prostrated before him.

This was perhaps the center of the port of Valentia, the duke’s estate. It was common knowledge that the Duke of Valentia had been a post held by the reigning monarch for generations, so the official residence was used extremely rarely. The administration was centered in the neighboring estate of the governor. Even so, the duke’s residence had been perfectly prepared to house Zenjirou and showed no sign of having stood empty until very recently.

A breeze rather particular to port towns was carried through the open window along with the dazzling sunlight, heavy with the scent of salt. The huge expanse of almost blindingly blue sea spread out before him, along with the stone-built port, made him think of ancient European capitals. The majority of the stones were white, so the white of the port and the blue of the sea formed a line of wondrous contrast.

“Whew, if you added the Capuan red to it, you’d pretty much get a tricolor. Kinda makes me want to start up a chant.”

Blue, white, and finally red. Those three colors reminded Zenjirou of the soccer team he’d supported back in Japan, prompting the musings to fall from his lips as he narrowed his eyes against the reflections from the water’s surface.

As he did, there was a knock at the door, followed by a familiar woman’s voice.

“Sir Zenjirou, may I take a moment of your time?”

“Oh, sure.”

His reflexive permission prompted a woman—who was indeed familiar—to

enter.

“Excuse me,” said the middle-aged woman as she entered. She was wearing a dark red maid uniform. This woman was the head of cleaning in the inner palace, Ines.

She was, unlike the other older maids there, a slender woman and exceedingly graceful. While—as her title implied—she was only responsible for cleaning in the inner palace, that was by no means all she could do. She had the talent to, if the fancy took her, substitute for even the head maid Amanda and take command of all of the maids who worked there.

Ines came to a stop in front of Zenjirou as he stood there backed by the window and gave a refined bow before stating her business.

“Lord Rafaello Márquez has requested an audience. Do you wish to grant it?”

“Ah, I see,” Zenjirou said, just barely managing to swallow the follow-up before it left his mouth and avoiding asking what he should do.

Damn, I’m so used to letting Aura make all the decisions, he thought regretfully.

He may have only just arrived in Valentia, but he had done so with Aura’s teleportation magic, so he hadn’t the faintest feeling of travel fatigue or anything similar. In fact, he hadn’t even felt like he had traveled to the far western coast until he had gone to the window and seen it for himself.

He honestly would have *liked* to say that he wanted time to get used to the climate and customs of the coastal city in comparison to those of the capital, but he wasn’t here on vacation, after all. He had come to work, and he should prioritize said work.

The problem is that accepting right off the bat could make them take me lightly.

He thought back on his lessons with Octavia, but unfortunately, there was no case study they had done that was a perfect fit. The only choice he had, then, was to make the decision himself.

After a few moments of thought, he spoke. “Got it. Then let’s do it. Prepare a

room, if you would?”

Since he didn't know what the best choice was, he could merely follow his preferences, and Zenjirou's custom was to get his work done as quickly as he could.

“Very well, sir,” Ines answered her lord's bidding with a humble bow.

Roughly an hour later, Zenjirou was seated across from a man called Rafaello Márquez in a room of the estate.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir Zenjirou. I am Rafaello, the first son of Count Manuel of the Márquez family. I cannot thank you enough for agreeing to meet so quickly today.”

Zenjirou studied the man from his seat as the visitor offered a fluid greeting with perfect manners.

So, this is Rafaello Márquez, the other man who could have married Aura...

He looked to be in his early thirties and had a medium build with more or less attractive features, but there was nothing that made him stand out as particularly handsome. If anything, his relative attractiveness weakened his impression. At the very least, he was not a man like General Pujol Guillén, whom one would never forget, even after only a single meeting.

“It is of no concern. I decided we needed to speak quickly. First, sit.”

Even after more than a year, he wasn't used to the high-handed tone he was taking, but he was grateful for it now. The dislike he held towards this former candidate for his wife's hand made his tone sharpen unintentionally, and in turn made speaking down to the other sound more natural.

“Yes, sir,” Rafaello answered, sitting in a chair across from Zenjirou, separated by a large rectangular table.

Even his manner of moving the seat out and sitting was oddly inconspicuous. It was probably another facet of refined etiquette, keeping the movements flowing in such a way that they didn't cause displeasure to anyone observing.

“I would hear your report, Lord Rafaello. Have you met with the person calling herself a princess of the Northern Continent?” Zenjirou asked, lacing his hands

together and placing them on the table.

Rafaello gave a slight nod as he answered. "I have. However, I was dispatched a mere three days prior, so I have yet to exchange more than simple pleasantries."

It was unlikely that there was anyone in the city who didn't know of the arrival of the four-masted ship carrying a woman calling herself the princess of the Kingdom of Uppasala. That was far from surprising, as there was no hiding the massive ship docked in the port.

"A basic impression is sufficient. Tell me your thoughts on this princess."

"Very well. The head of the group is a seventeen-or eighteen-year-old girl going by the name of Freya Uppasala. By her own account, she is the first princess of a country on the Northern Continent called the Kingdom of Uppasala."

"Her credibility?"

"If my own perspective is sufficient, then I think it is all but assured." Rafaello answered the short question smoothly, almost like he had prepared the answer. "There are slight dissimilarities in the fine details of her comportment, but that is likely due to the differences in customs between our countries. Her behavior and speech are both refined and familiar to her."

In this instance, Freya's youth actually increased her credibility. There were skilled con artists who had the ability to flawlessly imitate royalty with aristocratic speech and actions, but such practices inevitably took decades in those circles, which was unlikely for someone of her age.

"I see," Zenjirou answered with an expressionless nod.

Aura had said that taking command of a huge four-masted ship likely meant the stranger was the real deal, and that seemed to have proven true. Of course, her being a princess didn't necessarily guarantee that she was not also a con artist. Or more accurately, roughly half of a royal's role when carrying out diplomacy with the weight of the country on their shoulders was running a con. Underestimating her just because she was young could well leave them destitute.

“If you have only exchanged greetings, I assume you are unaware of the purpose of their voyage?”

“I am. We have not yet spoken of those matters. However, she did say that their arrival here was partially a coincidence. The ship had certainly left for the Southern Continent, but they encountered a storm on the waves and were washed here.”

“Oh?” Zenjirou’s eyes opened wide in response to the report, his surprise evident. If he could put it rather imprudently, it was good news. Being caught in a storm would have certainly damaged the ship. Therefore, without any actual negotiation, they could offer the services of their shipwrights as a favor and gain at least a cursory smattering of knowledge of the four-masted ships.

At any rate, he had already been given instructions in case matters progressed according to Aura’s hypotheses, so he didn’t hesitate to make a decision.

“In that case, we shall offer shipwrights to assist in their repairs. If Princess Freya’s ship is damaged, then we are to give all possible aid. This was Her Majesty Aura’s decision in the capital as well.”

“Understood, sir. I shall make the preparations at once.”

Whether Rafaello was aware of the hidden meaning behind the prince consort’s words or not, his peaceful expression remained in place as Zenjirou stressed that the decision was Aura’s.

“Preparations at once,” huh? Guess he’s just as Aura said, Zenjirou thought to himself when he heard the man’s answer, evaluating his abilities.

Aura had described Rafaello Márquez as “an exceedingly talented civil official but also utterly passive.” In essence, she meant that he had the ability to carry out any orders he was given to achieve the best result possible but lacked the initiative to act proactively. Frankly, he was a rarity among the many more audacious men of the Capuan kingdom. If his loyalty had been to the country itself rather than to his own family, Aura might have happily made him her husband.

“However,” Rafaello continued, his calm expression not shifting an inch, “the

craftsmen of Valentia are constantly busy. I do of course intend to utilize them as much as possible, but repairs on such a large ship with such a dearth of personnel could lead to issues. With your permission, I would also like to involve people from outside the region.”

Zenjirou kept his own calm facade up to the best of his ability while putting purposeful stress on his next words. “I see, and would those perhaps be craftsmen from the Márquez County?”

There was a distinct tinge of cynicism in his words for once, but the heir to the county simply agreed with his soft smile still in place.

“They would. Embarrassingly enough considering my age, I have spent the majority of my time within the county, so I am rather unfamiliar with any other craftsmen. Fortunately, it is not too distant from Valentia.”

“I see.”

“I would greatly appreciate your understanding here.”

“Including men from outside of the region would also require permission from Her Majesty.”

“You need not worry on that front. My father is in the capital and has already discussed it with Her Majesty. This is the letter confirming it.”

As he spoke, Rafaello pulled a folded sheet of drake parchment from his pocket and placed it on the table. Zenjirou glanced at Ines where she was waiting in the wings. She followed the signal and glided across the floor to the table and retrieved the sheet to hand to Zenjirou. He gave a hum as he glanced over the sheet, but unfortunately, he could only read about half of what was there. He had been studying every evening, but his comprehension of Capua’s written language was only about that of a Japanese middle schooler’s English comprehension.

He was at least able to verify that Aura and Manuel Márquez’s names were signed at the end as he handed it back to the maid. Once she took the sheet, she placed it so that Zenjirou would be able to see it before calmly beginning to read.

“I shall now read it out,” she stated. “While serving as an aide to Zenjirou

Capua, Raffaello Márquez will have the following allowances in regard to the distribution of manpower...”

The contents of the parchment as Ines read it aloud were essentially what Raffaello had said. As far as the current situation was concerned, if there was insufficient manpower to address it, Raffaello was permitted to involve people from outside of Valentia. Under those circumstances, however, the burden of payment would fall upon the Márquez family.

I see, so essentially the Márquezes want a bite of the pie, and in exchange, Raffaello will act as a faithful subordinate here, and the economic side of things will be shared between us.

It was reasonable, but Aura and the count had already come to an agreement. The fact that Aura hadn’t told Zenjirou directly served to underscore the idea that Zenjirou was there for show while Raffaello would deal with the matter itself.

Zenjirou would have preferred to know about it ahead of time, but he was also aware that Aura was considerably more adept in these matters than he.

“Very well. It seems to be as you say. If Her Majesty has given her permission then I have no cause to refuse. Manage it as you wish.” He spoke bluntly, his tone one of someone who had ceased to concern themselves.



“Yup, a crap night’s sleep to be honest...” was the first thing that left Zenjirou’s mouth when he awoke the next morning in the ducal estate.

The room was lit by a shaft of light making its way through the gap in the firmly shuttered window as he stretched grandly and woke himself up.

“Ur...guh!”

He had slept longer than usual but still *felt* like he hadn’t slept enough. He had been ready for the difficulty of living away from the inner palace, but it seemed he hadn’t been ready enough. While the worst of the heat had passed, Capua’s nights were still sweltering. He had recently regained his air conditioning in the bedroom back at home, so his body wasn’t used to the intense heat of the night.

The only decent lighting he had was the LED flashlight he had brought from the capital, so there wasn't much he could do at night either. He could use the hand crank from the flashlight to charge his phone, which he had brought to use as a clock, but he didn't have a single game on it—something he rather regretted at this point.

He hadn't used his game consoles as often recently either, so he had decided he didn't need to bring one and had more time than he knew what to do with during the night now. In retrospect, the reason he hadn't played his games at night recently was that he was either talking with Aura or practicing magic.

Aura was obviously nowhere to be seen, but he also didn't have his PC or video camera with the exact pronunciations of the chants recorded on them. He could practice controlling his mana without those, but he lacked the focus to spend hours staring at his own hand and adjusting the mana output up and down. Therefore, he had too much free time and retired at an early hour despite not being sleepy.

"Ugh, I underestimated this a bit. I'll have to get used to it, though," he told himself, pulling his blue-pajamaed body out of bed and planting his bare feet onto the carpet.

His sleepwear, loungewear, and underwear were all things from Earth he had brought with him. Aura had said, "You will have official business and need to look the part for the whole day, so you should at least be able to relax in familiar clothing when you are in private lest you regret it later," and he had followed her advice, bringing a fair amount of clothing along. Thus far, it seemed she was correct. He hadn't slept well even in his own pajamas. If he had allowed his sleepwear to be sourced locally, he wasn't sure he would have been able to sleep at all.

"I managed just fine in the yukata from the hotels when I was off on business trips, though. Guess I can't lump together a hotel stay in the same country and staying away from home in another world."

As he spoke, Zenjirou felt around for the shutters to open them. "Argh! The sun's bright as anything on the coast."

There came a knock at the door while he was squinting against the sudden

bright morning sun streaming into the room. He started to give his usual “go ahead” but swallowed the words before they left his mouth.

This wasn’t the inner palace, and he could only use such an easygoing tone with the maids there because of the certainty that they would not gossip about it. Normally, casual speech with a maid would most certainly be nothing to boast about for a royal. It would not only lower Zenjirou’s standing but could also bring Aura into disrepute for making such a man her consort.

“What?” he said towards the door, keeping his public facade up and the firmness in his voice.

“S-Sir! My apologies for disturbing your rest, but we have brought a change of clothes.”

Perhaps as should have been expected, the voice that answered him was an unfamiliar one. It was a strained, young, female voice.

“Enter,” he replied bluntly with an internal wince at having to maintain the act even in his own room.

“Pardon us, sir,” the voice came again as the door opened to admit three young maids. The first of them held the door open while the second carried the formal clothing and the third softly shut the door once they had entered.

Their sequence of movements was well refined for their age, with the single exception being the almost pitiable nerves showing on their tanned faces. It was far from a surprise. Zenjirou was perhaps the second-most important aristocrat in the country. The maids of the inner palace knew his temperament, but the people of Valentia had heard only rumors, so he was simply “a man who could have them executed if the whim took him.”

Of course, there were very few nobles in Capua who would punish the help for sport, but these three hadn’t seen enough of him to make a judgment call on whether he was part of the majority or minority.

“Good morning, Sir Zenjirou. We have come to offer our aid with your dressing.”

Zenjirou once again had to hold back any casualness as he addressed the girls bowing in front of him. “Good work. Please do.”

He had aimed for a calm demeanor that would hopefully alleviate their needless nerves while still being dignified enough not to come across as bizarre for royalty. It was tiring to do, but this was part of his job as far as he was concerned, so he stood in his pajamas with his hands slightly parted while waiting for them to approach.

It embarrassed Zenjirou slightly to have help from the young maids with dressing, but the clothing was complicated and was held in place with countless ties, so he couldn't do it himself.

He could, naturally, remove his pajamas on his own, but insisting on doing so when he could go no further was pointless. With him standing there in expressionless resignation, the three removed his pajamas with practiced movements and began dressing him in the third uniform.

Being dressed up wordlessly weighed on Zenjirou, so he brought up a topic that seemed safe. "That reminds me, what is Ines doing?"

The three maids started at being addressed by their temporary master, but one of them soon replied.

"Sir, she is currently giving instructions in the kitchen. She also said that she would be meeting with sirs Rafaello and Damian to discuss today's plans."

In the inner palace, Ines only held the role of head of cleaning, but in Valentia, she was practically head maid while also acting as something akin to a secretary for Zenjirou. In some ways, she was kept busy by not only the prince consort, who was ostensibly in charge here, but also by Rafaello.

The maids' quick movements soon had him dressed, and he checked his appearance in the mirror he had brought with him before asking for a confirmation from the trio.

"I believe there is a meeting with Princess Freya after breakfast. When should I head for the dining room?"

"The kitchen staff are currently making preparations, sir. Once they are done, someone will arrive to inform you, so if you would wait here until then?"

His calm tone and expression must have allowed their nerves to abate to some degree as the young maid answered briskly and in a much more fluid

manner.

“I see. Very well; you are dismissed until then.”

The maids exchanged concerned looks at his instruction. Nobles with sufficient standing to warrant maids would usually not be concerned about their presence in the room. In fact, it was practically general practice to have at least one maid in the room to receive orders at a moment's notice.

By that metric, dismissing them now wasn't a particularly appropriate act, but he would be suffocated by the constant presence, in spite of knowing the correct etiquette. Aware of the strangeness of it, he resolved to push through with his selfishness.

“You are dismissed,” he repeated.

“A-At once.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Please do not hesitate to call if you have any requests.”

The three maids, still confused, obediently followed his order.

Zenjirou had been unable to truly enjoy the breakfast shared with both the governor and Rafaello, but now that it was over, he was finally going to meet the self-proclaimed princess and her retinue.

The meeting was taking place in the reception hall of the duke's residence. It was similar to the reception hall in the royal palace. There was no dais with a throne like the latter had, but there was a chair that symbolized the majesty of the duke.

Naturally, the only person permitted to sit in said chair was the duke him or herself. The governor usually used his own neighboring residence, and while Zenjirou may have had special dispensation, he also could hardly sit in the chair.

Yet, with his rank as prince consort, it would be incredibly rude to require him to stand, so there had been an equally grand chair brought next to the duke's where Zenjirou was currently sitting.

He was doing his utmost to keep a composed expression on his face and resisting the urge to shuffle his legs as Rafaello stood to his right and Ines to his

left. While Ines was nothing more than a maid, she was still standing level with Rafaello, who was a leading noble in the country. This too was unavoidable, however, as Rafaello was only there, officially at least, as an aide to Zenjirou.

As this happened, the door opened and the people in question entered. Two women were standing behind the door as two soldiers who worked there pushed them open.

So, that's the "princess," huh? Rafaello was right, she definitely carries herself like royalty. Doesn't look like she's got the mana for it, though. I guess the woman behind her's a bodyguard? Mana-wise she's about the same level. Is the princess suppressing hers on purpose? Zenjirou mused, assessing the approaching pair as he sat on the finely carved chair.

The woman walking ahead was probably the "self-proclaimed first princess" that Rafaello had reported on. In keeping with said report, she looked to be in the latter half of her teens.

The first thing to draw his eye when he saw Freya was her hairstyle. The strangely silver-blue color hair was cut just as it approached the nape of her neck. While he wasn't sure of the customs that far north, it was extremely rare to see a woman with short hair on the Southern Continent. There was a maid in the inner palace with short hair, but that was because her hair was simply too curly to manage properly when it grew out. He could tell at a glance that Freya's hair was straight and glossy, though, and it almost seemed a shame it was cut so short.

Are short haircuts common there? he wondered, but her clothing was still odd.

The clothes she wore could be summed up as a "captain's attire." Her legs were covered in white pants and long boots, while on her upper half she wore something that was almost a white shirt and a long jacket similar to a blazer, with a leather belt around her waist. It was a strange set of clothing, almost halfway between a first-class sailor's from the age of exploration and a modern naval officer's dress uniform, but it was also obviously men's clothing.

She's cut her hair short and worn men's clothes, so is she disguising herself as a man? That doesn't work, though —she gave her name as "Princess Freya," so

it's pretty half-hearted if she is.

As Zenjirou's internal monologue noted, Freya was dressed in clothing clearly meant for a man, yet she didn't seem to be trying to hide her sex. Her chest, covered slightly by a blue scarf-like cloth, was not full, but the soft swell was enough to put to rest to any claims of her being a man, and the belt around her waist cinched her clothes in to make her womanly curves obvious.

The cross-dressing girl's advance was stopped by a speech from the governor, Damian, from the side.

"Excuse me, but wait there. I beg your pardon, but we need to search you first."

"What rudeness! Who do you think you're talking to?!" the tall warrior shouted from behind the princess, taking offense at the governor's words.

The air was suddenly full of hostility. However, neither of them was in the wrong. Frankly, one could say that both were in the right. It was a natural reaction for a royal's bodyguard to take offense at a request for those in their charge to be searched. However, from the Valentian governor's perspective, a completely unknown, *self-proclaimed* princess was approaching one of only three members of the country's royal family, so ensuring that there was nothing untoward was essential.

"I am aware of the discourtesy. However, such a risk to Sir Zenjirou cannot be allowed. You will certainly be compensated in some way, so I ask that you please understand."

"Then you could have done this in another room! What need is there to disgrace the princess like this?!"

"Such would not be a complete guarantee."

The governor likely wanted to say that searching her in another room wouldn't stop her from acquiring a weapon in the intervening time even if she was cleared originally, but it sounded somewhat obstinate even to Zenjirou.

Is he maybe trying to put her in a weaker position from the start by doing it here?

With that in mind, he glanced towards Rafaello, who was next to him, but his temporary aide was merely observing with a placid expression. In that case, with it being better for him to essentially remain window dressing until a final decision was made, there was no reason for him to interfere, he concluded, his shoulders untensing as he decided to see how things played out.

Freya herself remained silent as her bodyguard continued her tirade. “If you want to try that, I’m the princess’s bodyguard! I have a duty to make sure no harm comes to her!” she cried, clenching a fist that was rather large for a woman.

“I apologize,” Ines said, having shifted from her position next to Zenjirou just before the woman got ready to fight, gliding in front of her and bowing her head deeply. “But I am tasked with the inspection of Her Highness.”

“Wha?!”

Ines kept her head bowed in the face of the warrior’s almost excessive surprise.

“Naturally, I shall do my utmost to reduce the burden on Her Highness. The entire inspection will be carried out within that,” she said, gesturing towards four maids holding a huge cloth, somewhat like a blackout curtain. “I would of course appreciate your presence and protection of the princess as well.”

The cloth would be used to block anyone outside from watching as the inspection was carried out. Of course, such an inspection would not require her to completely strip. It would at most see the outer layers of her outfit removed and a brief pat-down to check for concealed weapons. Still, the whole idea of being exposed and touched all over was still rather humiliating—even if the person carrying it out was also a woman.

“B-But!”

Regardless, the woman didn’t show any sign of yielding, and the princess finally broke her silence in rebuke.

“Enough, Skaji.”

“But, Princess!”

There was a slight tinge of red in Freya's snow-white skin—oddly untanned despite the long voyage—as she spoke calmly to her retainer.

“I stand here with no way to confirm my legitimacy. There is nothing incorrect with their precautions.”

More specifically, rather than having no way to prove her identity, there was no one there who could verify any such claim. Their ship, the *Glasir's Leaf*, had things such as treasured swords with the royal crest, or a tiara with a blue sapphire, something only permitted to royalty, but Capuans had no concept of her country's royal crest or customs, so it would do no good. They would obviously be able to tell from the fine gold and silver on the sword, or the huge blue sapphire, that the items were beyond a normal person's means, but they were not enough to prove her legitimacy as a princess.

“We truly appreciate your forbearance. Let us begin, girls.”

“Yes, ma'am!” the maids answered her command, covering Ines, Freya, and the warrior with the cloth.

Zenjirou and the others on the other side unintentionally maintained their silence, so the sounds of rustling cloth as the two women divested themselves of their clothes along with the light touches of Ines's hand on their skin were audible to the room.

Eventually, Ines's voice carried from the other side, saying, “That is sufficient. My deepest thanks for your cooperation,” which was followed immediately by the removal of the cloth.

Once more visible, Ines took a step forward and bowed respectfully. “Forgive my impudence. There were no issues.”

The governor then followed up with an apology of his own. “Please excuse us, Your Highness, you may continue onward.”

“Not at all. I understand your position,” Freya answered, her expression aloof and her gaze unwavering as she quietly advanced.

After thinking for a while, Zenjirou decided to stand from his chair and greet the approaching princess. He was the prince consort, and she was the first princess, so in terms of rank, there was no need for him to stand even if her

claim was true. But there was also not enough of a disparity in their ranks for it to cause an issue, so Zenjirou hoped that by greeting her in such a way, he could convey an apology that could not be spoken aloud.

The cross-dressing princess and her bodyguard stopped at the required spot, and Zenjirou looked at them from his standing position, taking care not to let his voice crack as he spoke.

“I am the husband of the current queen of Capua, Her Majesty Aura. My name is Zenjirou Capua. Ordinarily, Her Majesty would have been here under the auspices of her title as the Duchess of Valentia, but she cannot leave the capital due to her workload. Therefore, I am here as her representative. It is good to meet you,” he stated, reciting the speech he had decided on last night.

In response, the princess put her left foot behind her and gave a bow. “I am Captain Freya of the Royal Navy of Uppasala’s Eighth Ship, the *Glasir’s Leaf*. It is an honor to have the opportunity to make your acquaintance, Your Majesty. I also hope as King Gustav V’s second child and the first princess, Freya Uppasala, that this meeting can strengthen relations between our two lands.”

“A laudable desire,” Zenjirou answered, internally going over her greeting.

She introduced herself as the ship’s captain first rather than as a princess? So she’s prioritizing her position as the former here, at least?

He was aware that he wasn’t the best at rolling with unexpected developments and wasn’t happy about the statement coming out of left field.

Uh, well, I’d intended to change tack a bit after accepting her as a princess, but I guess it’d be better to just keep going, he decided, now directing his gaze towards their visitor’s companion.

“Would you introduce the warrior behind you as well? I can tell she seems to be particularly skilled.”

Of course, it was just a bluff. Zenjirou didn’t have the perception to be able to evaluate a warrior’s skill at a glance like that. He had simply been told that she had slain a sea dragon by Damian that morning, with a single attack of her spear. Further questioning had revealed that sea dragons had exceptionally thick skins and were hardy creatures, so even a vital shot wouldn’t take them

down in one hit unless it was excessively strong. A warrior managing such a feat would be first-class without question.

Freya smiled proudly and looked back at the other woman before speaking. “I would indeed. This is Victoria Kronkvist, one of our country’s finest warriors and also my bodyguard.”

The woman remained silent as she bowed her head.

“I see; a most reliable guard,” Zenjirou answered, looking the warrior—Victoria Kronkvist—over again.

She seemed to be in her late twenties, with long blonde hair pulled up into a ponytail. Her eyes were reddish-brown and her skin was probably originally the white of the Northern Continent but had been tanned dark by the sun at sea.

The initial impression of anyone who faced her would not be her coloring, though.

She’s huge, Zenjirou couldn’t help but think as he looked up at her.

The woman was tall enough that even with the separation in their levels, he couldn’t look her in the eye without purposefully looking up.

Forget Aura, she’s taller than Fatima and nowhere near as slender either.

If his estimates were correct, Freya would be around a hundred and sixty centimeters, and Victoria looked at least a head and a half taller behind her, so she would be at least one-eighty. Her body was also obviously well trained, visible even through her leather armor. If he had to say, the slope of her shoulders and the relative lack of broadness for her height meant that she didn’t have as intimidating an air as Aura, but her arms, legs, and backside were clearly those of a tempered warrior. If you wanted to meet a woman of her physique in the modern day, you would probably need to go to a world tournament for volleyball or basketball.

Still, she doesn’t draw the eye much even with her height. If anything, Princess Freya is much more noticeable when they stand like this.

Rather than calling the warrior plain, it was more that Freya was unusually attention-grabbing. That aside, there was something in the introduction that

Zenjirou wanted to question further.

“Victoria Kronkvist, you say? I seem to recall you used a different name with her earlier though?”

Freya answered his question with a prideful smile as if impressed he had noticed. “That is her title. We have the custom of giving skilled warriors the names of past heroes. ‘Skaji’ was a preeminent witch in ancient times who also made a name for herself on the battlefield.”

“Ah.”

Similar customs of gifting the names of skilled warriors was a common practice even on Earth. While he wasn’t aware of the importance of the name “Skaji,” the fact that this woman had been entrusted with a princess’s safety meant that she was doubtless one of the foremost warriors in the country.

Still, she was here exclusively as Freya’s bodyguard, so long as nothing endangered her, the warrior would watch silently, and there should be no particular need to concern himself with her, he decided, shifting his gaze from her back to the cross-dressing princess.

“I understand, Princess Freya. I welcome you and your companions as guests of Valentia of the Kingdom of Capua. Separate accommodations will be prepared for you, so you may move there for the time being. Naturally, your ship may remain docked also. As a representative of Queen Aura, I, Zenjirou Capua, assure your safety. Please discuss the details with my aide, Rafaello.”

With the end of his speech, Zenjirou indicated the count’s heir with a glance, whereupon the man gave a respectful bow.

“Understood, sir. Princess Freya, I am Rafaello Márquez, and I am at your disposal. Contact me with anything that you need.”

“It is good to meet you,” Freya answered, not bowing her head; in fact, she raised her chin ever so slightly.



“Phew...” Zenjirou sighed, letting out his relief once he returned to his private room and was sure that only he and Ines were present.

“Are you well, Sir Zenjirou? If the clothing is too much for you then you may relax; I will be able to fix them alone.”

“Sorry, I’ll take you up on that,” he answered, unable to beat the temptation. He roughly loosened the belt and cords of the pants before collapsing on the sofa with a thump.

The only occasion where he could stop the majestic facade expected of him as royalty was when he was alone or when only Ines was with him. Excluding the time just before he slept, there were very few chances for him to be alone during the day. He honestly had to admire her for being able to remain with him as much as possible despite her extra duties as a temporary head maid.

“Princess Freya and her companions have moved safely to their accommodations.”

“Right, I’ll have to tell Lord Rafaello he did well later. They’re comfortable?”

“They are not.”

“What? They’re not?” he asked in surprise at the casual negation.

The surprise was natural. Earlier was one thing, but Zenjirou had accepted them as guests of honor from the Northern Continent, so making them uncomfortable was a real issue. At the very least, he had a responsibility to attempt to alleviate it.

“In what way?” he asked, sitting up on the sofa.

“Well,” she answered with a reluctantly amused smile, “they beat around the bush in several ways, but simply put, they cannot deal with the heat.”

“A-Ahh... Not much we can do there,” he answered in understanding before flopping back in his seat. “Espiridion said their country is in the far north, being on the Northern Continent, anyway. I guess it’d be like they were from Scandinavia or Greenland on Earth. We’d probably be close to the equator like Africa or South India, maybe?”

With his very rough approximation of the difference in climates, Zenjirou was rather sympathetic to the group. His knowledge of the regions was pretty half-baked. Temperatures in Scandinavia commonly got above the thirties during

the summer, but perhaps fortunately for his comparison to the region, Uppasala was a cold land where the temperature rarely rose above twenty degrees even in midsummer.

Because of that, his concerns were right on the mark. The hottest part of the year being behind them or not, the temperature was still often over thirty-five Celsius during the day, so it was no shock that the northerners would admit defeat to the heat.

“We need to ensure that they at least have enough water to be comfortable. Take care to fulfill any food-related requests they have as best you can too.”

That was all he could think of. Without the electricity in the inner palace, there was little he could do.

“I will see that the water casks are refilled as often as we are able. I would prefer to increase our personnel to do so, so I shall discuss it with Lord Damian later,” Ines answered with a nod.

The estate they were using had wells of its own but not enough for its size, so the water was drawn up and placed in casks for places farther from the wells. However, water in such casks would immediately grow much warmer than the water from underground and therefore needed regular replacement, but that was obviously hard labor even for grown men, and it was completely understandable for Ines to request additional manpower.

“Hm, got it. It’ll be tough, but do what you can to make them comfortable. At least enough that shows our willingness.”

“I understand, sir.”

He didn’t know how the negotiations with Freya would go, so he wanted to ensure that she was at least in a good mood, to begin with, even if the earlier inspection had harmed their opinion of Capuans. It was also doubtless part of the negotiations, so Zenjirou had no intention of interfering with his layman’s perspective, but going about the negotiations in good faith was a better fit for his personality.

“I appreciate it. So, what are my plans for the rest of the day?” he asked, changing the topic.

“For the time being,” the superlative maid answered immediately, “the plan is for much of the actual business of demands and compensation to be discussed, so there is no call for you to deal directly with the princess. Lord Rafaello will be handling the bulk of the negotiations, so outside of a progress report in the evening, you should be relatively free.”

While Zenjirou had a general say in the matter as a whole, he was not expected to sound the strangers out and come to a profitable agreement for the both of them on his own. Therefore, while the actual negotiations took place, he would be relatively unburdened with responsibilities.

“Damn it, I definitely should have brought a game or something to kill the time.”

He was well aware that although he had nothing to do with his time, exploration would cause trouble to everyone around him. Boredom was something that would increase and increase, growing more of a burden as it progressed. He would have to come up with a way of amusing himself without bothering anyone around him.

For the time being, he’d had a thought at breakfast and decided to ask Ines about it.

“Hey, there were shellfish at breakfast, right? Do you know what happens to the shells?”

While giving a gracefully askance look at her master’s abrupt, ineffable question, she answered honestly. “I believe they will be disposed of. There is not much use for them, after all.”

A smile made its way onto his face at the expected answer. “Great, then do you think I could have them? I’d also like to borrow a pestle and mortar along with some people who are used to using them. Oh, I’ll need some sand from a beach too, as white and shiny as possible,” he said.

He was after, it went without saying, the materials for glassmaking: slaked lime and silica sand. Their experiments so far had used shells from nearby lakes and sand from inland areas. They hadn’t yet used anything from Valentia, so Zenjirou thought it was worth the attempt.

Ines was unaware of his thought process but decided that it was easily arranged and agreed immediately. “Understood, I shall make the preparations at once. However, if our stay is likely to be for a significant amount of time, you may be better served by sending a dwarf wyvern and having Her Majesty send some of the maids from the inner palace.”

He approved her suggestion wholeheartedly. “Yeah, it might cause them a bit of hassle, but I’d like to. I can’t relax with the maids from here hanging around.”

It was something that Ines would appreciate as well. While the on-site maids were sufficient for the work required, only those of the inner palace could truly connect with Zenjirou. Of course, she had been instructed to remain with him as much as possible, so even if more maids from the inner palace joined them, it would not lead to a dramatic reduction in the work she had to do.

“I shall prepare a letter for you to sign later.”

“Got it, please do,” he answered with a slight nod, still relaxing on the sofa.



Meanwhile, Princess Freya was in a room of the guesthouse and talking with her trusted bodyguard.

“A comfortable room, I feel. These ‘slippers’ are intriguing too,” she said, waving her feet around with slightly poor manners from where she sat on the sofa. She had now stopped cross-dressing and was wearing a long, light blue dress. She had little in the way of accessories, but the beautiful glossy dress and light makeup gave her the very image of a secluded noble girl, overriding any thoughts of her short hair.

There was a clear frown on the tall warrior’s face as she took in her liege’s words. “I dislike them. Cloth shoes like this are awful for your footing if the need to flee or fight arises, and a shield-bearer would easily immobilize me by crushing my toes with a single strike. Princess, may I please wear my leather footwear? I will clean the soles fastidiously.”

The Kingdom of Uppasala had no cultural bias towards slippers that were explicitly for indoor wear. The princess shook her head with a smile at the uncomfortable warrior.

“You cannot, Skaji. They say to follow the laws of the land on land, and those of the sea on the waves. I would rather not cause any crosscurrents here.”

The saying was close to the Earth phrase of “when in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

The warrior gave a reluctant affirmation before bracing her slipper-clad feet as if to test how well she could fight in her current state.

“So?” Freya asked. “Can you fight?”

In answer to her question, Skaji tried out a sequence of combat footwork a couple of times before replying, “I can. My footing is firmer than I expected. The soles have leather attached to prevent slipping, so I should be able to manage.”

Her confident expression returned as she spoke and she clapped her hand to the steel sword at her waist. The sword was sheathed in a leather scabbard, only the tip and opening of which were reinforced with metal. The weapon was plain and undecorated but was a cut above those of Capua in terms of sharpness and durability.

Uppasala was one of the more advanced countries technologically even within the Northern Continent. That technological strength was the reason behind their survival as an independent state even with the low average level of mana within the population and the royal family’s lack of lineal magic.

“Then that is all that matters. Considering our earlier audience, I doubt things will devolve to a fight, but we must prepare for the possibility regardless. Should it come to pass, I will be relying on you, Skaji.”

“You can do so, Princess; not a scratch will befall you!” The tall warrior kept her left hand on her sheathed sword while throwing her shoulders back proudly.

“I certainly hope so.” The princess smiled back before transitioning to a more serious expression and bringing up a grave topic. “I expected it to be the case, but it would seem that we should assume we will be unable to prevent our ship’s technology from leaking.”

The warrior’s expression mimicked her liege’s as she answered. “Indeed. I am not well-versed in shipbuilding, but we sustained major damage in the storm.

The on-board carpenters claim that repairs are possible but that it will be a large-scale operation and require a significant workforce.”

Regardless of what a layman might see, the damage sustained by the *Glasir's Leaf* during its expedition between the two continents, when combined with that taken in the tempest it had been swallowed by, was clear at a glance to any specialist. A long voyage back between the continents in its current state was absurd.

Freya was more relaxed in front of her confidant and let out a deep sigh. “I see. It leaves us little leeway in our negotiations. Lord Rafaello stated that all repairs would be completely free of charge, so it could even be counted as a blessing.”

“It is an awfully blatant offer, isn't it?”

“It certainly is.”

Naturally, they were referring to Rafaello Márquez's—along with the country at his back's—true aims. They wished to take the knowledge of how to construct ships larger than they themselves could currently build by aiding in the repairs of a more advanced example. However, as Freya had said, they could not refuse the help even with their host's ulterior motive being clear. Until the ship was repaired, they had no route home.

In the worst case, they could head north by land and board a trading vessel between the two continents in a country where such trade took place, but that would incur a debt to the country with the port and the country whose flag the trading ship sailed under. With that in mind, this compromise was preferable, even with the leak of technology.

“Our techniques will quite possibly be taken regardless, so it may even be better to cooperate and oversee the construction of a shipyard for ships of our size.”

“Princess, that would be going too far,” the warrior replied, paling as her liege rested her chin in her hand.

“Naturally, I do not intend to make such a suggestion, but I believe it would be an allowable outcome, depending on the circumstances. Skaji, we will not be

able to maintain our navy at its current size for many more generations with how things stand at present,” she reminded her bodyguard, biting her lip.

Uppasala was a steel exporter with superlative smithing. The climate was harsh, with the country covered in snow for half the year. Despite that, ocean currents meant that their ports remained free of ice throughout. The charcoal fuel for their forges came from the trees, as did the firewood to stave off the cold and the main component of the ships they built.

Firewood and charcoal didn’t require grand trees, but with nothing said to the contrary, the general public would rather work together to fell larger trees nearby than go up into the mountains to gather wood. The situation was dire by the time the royal family had noticed the decline of their forests and issued an edict.

They had of course placed an immediate ban on felling what remained of their biggest trees along with carrying out reforestation throughout the country, but what little they had left was of great concern, and there was no guarantee their resources would last until the reforestation had borne fruit. Gaining lumber was one of the more important goals that their expedition had set out with.

“So, directly transporting the necessary wood for large ships is impossible,” Skaji said, her words closer to a statement than a question.

“Indeed,” Freya answered bluntly. “There were more sea dragons than expected on our route. Whether we were to tow the lumber or somehow fit it onto the ship itself, the stability and speed would suffer greatly, and we would not make it back.”

Their greatest desire was for long and thick pieces of wood that could serve as the keel of a large ship, essentially its spine. Such pieces would be close in length to the ship itself and either towing or carrying them on board for more than a hundred days through open water was madness. They had known that the possibility of success was slim upon setting out, but the actual voyage had made that impossibility clear, which was rather disheartening.

However, Freya kept the negative emotions from her face as she spoke to her confidant in a calm tone of voice. “In the worst case, we should be able to

purchase sufficient wood from our neighbors for a while—another reason we should form our own intercontinental trade agreements to make money.”

“Trade with the Southern Continent? I daresay the safest bets would be sugar and spices.”

Both items were staples that even the commoners had access to in the Southern Continent, but those on the Northern Continent would need a silver coin for even a pinch of them.

“Indeed. Drake hide and bones would also be safe. We were fortunate that our cargo suffered little damage.”

“The damage to the fabrics, furs, and ironware was insignificant. We should make a tidy sum if we can exchange it at the usual intercontinental rates.”

The Northern Continent essentially had no larger reptiles, while the Southern Continent lacked larger mammals. Therefore, drake products went for a premium in the North, and the woolen fabrics and furs were rarities in the South. The majority of the countries on the Northern Continent had relatively low demand for drake bones and leathers, but Uppasala was, fortunately, an exception.

“I would prefer something unique to the country that is harder to get through intercontinental trade, but that will suffice for now,” Freya mused. “At any rate, considering I demanded the captaincy from my father and brother, I cannot return without results. Skaji, the seas will be rough, but please lend me your aid.”

“My life is yours to command,” the warrior pledged, once more placing her hand on her sword and standing at attention.

Intermission 1 — The Mountain Hunt

While this was going on, General Pujol's men had rendezvoused on the salt road with reinforcements from the capital and were commencing their hunt through the mountains in earnest.

The soldiers had separated into groups of a few dozen under his command and were progressing cautiously into the mountains, wary of their surroundings. Soldiers hacked through the undergrowth and thick ivy impeding their progress using heavy axes. Behind them, others bound the cuttings together and moved them out of the way. Even as they worked, heavily equipped soldiers gripped their short spears, keeping watch. There was also a young soldier in the center of the formation, in the safest location, with a wooden whistle hanging from his neck, ready to blast at the first sign of any incidents.

There were at most thirty men in the immediate area, but if the whistle sounded, there were several groups of a similar scale that would hear it. Pujol had ordered that if any group encountered either the swarm raptors or another enemy force, they were to focus on defense and make absolutely certain the whistle was sounded.

Of course, one or two of the creatures could easily be dispatched by the escort. However, the area was thickly wooded, which led to poor visibility and difficulty grasping the enemy composition. Due to that, with his men's survival foremost on his mind, Pujol had given the order that any resistance at all was to see the whistle sounded, despite the decrease in efficiency that may pose.

Consequently, their rate of progress had dropped significantly, but so had the risk to the soldiers. A drawn-out expedition would cause fatigue to accumulate and therefore increase the danger, but they, fortunately, had enough men to work in shifts along with plenty of sugar to reenergize them and alcohol to decrease their stress, all stocked in the rear camp.

It was a lavish plan, spending money like water, but Aura had personally told

him to prioritize lives, so he wouldn't let it concern him. The treasurers would have sour looks on their faces, but he was sure that Aura would understand his decisions. One could never have too much in the way of resources or manpower on the front lines.

A shrill whistle echoed through the air as the soldiers carried out their operation. The men ceased swinging their axes, and the escorts readied their spears.

“Captain!” one called.

“I know! The whistle is from the south. All hands, halt! Ready yourselves for battle! We will act as reinforcements for them!”

Aside from the escorts carrying the short spears, the men were currently equipped with axes and could not immediately charge into battle. They returned the axes to their hips and collected their spears from where they had left them nearby. Once the captain was sure they had all switched from the clearing equipment to their combat gear, he gave a loud order.

“Move out! Directly to the road first and rendezvous with the dash drakes there. Once mounted, make your way south along the road with all haste and provide aid! Understood?!”

This was the fifth time such orders had been given.

“Yes, sir!” the men chorused, not losing their wariness even though their tone was one of familiarity.

“Good! Begin!”

At the command from their captain, the group left the densely wooded area as quickly as they could.



Upon hearing the whistle, nearby squads were to immediately move to offer support. Xavier Gaziel's men from the Gaziel March's army were also near enough to hear.

“Double time! We're closest and have a duty to respond immediately!” Xavier called to his men over the wind, but the seriousness in his voice did not match

the volume with which they were spoken.

That was because the whistle had come from the squad led by Pujol Guillén. He was the one who had ordered the whistle to be sounded no matter how trifling the numbers were, and he would not contravene that order. He had therefore sounded the whistle, but it was hard to imagine that his personal squad would take any damage from anything lurking in the dense forests.

Xavier's optimistic outlook was half-correct and half off the mark.

"Andres, look after my drake; we'll continue on foot. Let's go!"

"Yes, Sir Xavier. Leave it to me. Godspeed!"

After entrusting his steed to his pale attendant, Xavier took his spear in hand and left the road for the trees. His progress through the plants was painfully slow on foot compared to the speed of heading down the road on his dash drake. The area had already been cut down, with the ivy and branches moved out of his way. Even so, the roots spread across the ground as well as its unevenness meant that a slight slip in footing could lead to serious wounds.

"Sir Xavier, take care!" Josep warned, having come up alongside him.

"Understood!" he called back strongly, keeping his gaze forward.

Xavier was smaller than the average Capuan man, and getting through tough terrain was a forte of his. For the knight's part, Josep was average in height but broad-shouldered. Despite that, his breath was even as he raced alongside Xavier, proof of his abilities.

Eventually, they could hear the roar of raptors, the yells of men, and the clash of metal. They were close.

"Hah, hah, hah!"

Xavier kept his impatience—and his breathing—in check as he ran, the scene finally unfolding before him.

"Greeee!"

Several raptors had attacked the general's group within the thick vegetation. Due to the density of the foliage, he couldn't get an accurate count, but there were at least ten of them. That Pujol's group had been the first to encounter

the objective of their hunting excursion was demonstrative of how strongly he drew attention.

“General Pujol!” Xavier called, immediately spotting the man.

The general was around two meters tall, easily distinguishable even in a group. With the thick vegetation around them, even Pujol could not stop the enemy’s approach. The two groups were slightly intermixed and lacked the space to use their bows. Frankly, maintaining any formation—even an imperfect one such as this—was impressive considering the locale.

The general himself was carrying a large round shield of bronze along with a curved iron sword as he entered the melee.

“Oh, Lord Xavier? My thanks for the backup,” the general replied, slashing with his right hand and slaying one of the raptors before him. “Join the fray. Cut them down as you can but do not pursue.”

The general’s voice not only lacked any fervor from the battle but also any sign of shortness of breath.

“Understood! All hands, join the attack! Do not break your triplets! If one of you is injured, move back as a squad!”

“Yes, sir!”

Gaziel’s troops followed his instructions and faced the raptors in groups of three. However, due to having deployed in such a way as to avoid hindering the general’s troops led to many men with nothing to fight.

It was a result of his proactiveness. Xavier did not overestimate his abilities enough to assume that he could give pertinent orders in a setting dense enough to make keeping formation and visibility difficult. Therefore, he followed his training and set up a formation of one soldier on defense with a shield, another on offense with a spear, and a third on watch duty. Each group was to fight at their discretion.

The method was fairly inefficient. However, General Pujol had taken the frontline role, and a calm inspection revealed that there weren’t all that many raptors in the area. With that taken into account, the relative inefficiency of his own troops should have no bearing on the outcome, Xavier decided.

“Those on the front lines, focus on defense! Offense should come from those on the sides!” he ordered loudly as he surveyed the battlefield as best he could.

Xavier was armed with a short spear in his right hand. It could be used for slashing but could also be thrown if needed. Considering their environment and the distribution of people, he remained at the rear, watching the soldiers carefully while constantly remaining ready to engage.

He didn't have the monstrous strength of the general and probably could not have slayed a raptor with a single spear himself. However, his attack could give a soldier who lost their footing time to recover if they were in danger.

Surprisingly, the first sign of danger came not from one of his men, but the supposed elites of General Pujol.

“Huh?!”

One of the soldiers had misjudged his distance as he thrust and had been dragged off his feet by the embedded spear.

“Guh!”

Even so, his training meant that he managed to avoid falling over and simply went down on one knee.

Xavier was sure that he wouldn't miss and hit a friendly at this range. However, before he could throw his spear, Pujol interposed himself between the soldier and raptor.

With a gasp, Xavier barely managed to abort his throw. “N-no way...” he muttered dazedly, a cold sweat on his brow.

He had checked his surroundings before moving to hurl the spear. He had only moved to throw when he was sure beyond a shadow of a doubt that no one was close enough to intervene. Regardless, Pujol had leaped in from nowhere. Despite the thick vegetation, despite the battle, and despite his leather armor, shield, and sword.

That was beyond human, to put it mildly. Further, that wasn't where the superhuman feats ended.

“Hssshhha!”

“Hmph.”

As the beast roared in anger and stretched its neck towards him, Pujol struck at its side with the shield in his left hand.



“Gyah?!”

Impossibly, the raptor was laid out from the single strike. Pujol did not overlook the opening. Immediately, his left foot found its way onto the creature’s face as he put his body weight onto it silently.

The raptor keened loudly. While its poor position was certainly a disadvantage, a man holding the creature down with a single foot was still an unrealistic sight.

“Hss!”

Finally, the general slashed the curved sword downwards with his right hand. The attack sliced cleanly through the raptor’s thick neck and decapitated it. Blood gushed from the stump as Pujol removed his foot from the corpse and addressed the soldier who had finally regained his footing.

“Are you wounded?” he asked.

“I am not. Apologies for the bother,” answered the soldier.

The other man—now back on his feet—had a tinge of self-recrimination in his expression. Being part of the general’s squad meant that he too was a Drake Marksmen Knight and he couldn’t hide his irritation at a mere swarm raptor getting the better of him.

The general gave the young soldier advice, still facing away. “Humans fundamentally cannot face a drake head-on. The difference in body and strength is too much. In the same way that a drake’s advantage is its size and strength, a person’s is linked to their weapons and skill. Do not assume you can stop a blow from a drake. Deflect it and remove your grip from weapons that are lodged in them. Unlike their claws, we can replace our weapons. If you have no weapon in reserve, rely on your comrades. That capability is the strength of our kind.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

The general’s advice seemed to lack a particularly strong impact on the soldier. Seeing the man’s reaction from his position at the rear, Xavier forgot that this was a battlefield and couldn’t suppress a sardonic smile.

The advice is common; logical too. Hearing it from General Pujol robs it of any persuasion it holds, though.

After all, one of those “unbeatable through strength” drakes had literally just been hurled aside through sheer strength, trapped underfoot, and then decapitated in a single strike by the man in question. While his advice was valid for the majority of people, the person it was coming from had just gone against it himself, so the lack of persuasiveness was no surprise.

However, the reason behind the general’s rank was not his personal strength.

“The raptors will withdraw. Use only thrown spears and arrows now,” he declared as he flicked the blood off his blade.

A moment later, his words were proven true as the raptors turned and escaped into the trees. It seemed like prophecy or precognition, but it was of course no supernatural phenomenon. The prediction was simply born from closely and calmly surveying the enemy’s morale and actions to estimate when they would retreat. While most would be incapable of such quick judgment, those with the role of commander could all make similar assumptions. However, the speed with which such a determination could be made led to a significant difference on the battlefield.

“Hahh!”

“Over there!”

“Take that!”

The soldiers trusted his words implicitly and instantly hefted their spears as the raptors turned, managing to rain down their weapons on the creatures as they vanished into the foliage. If the order had been given a moment later, the agile raptors’ retreat would have offered no chance for further assault.

Apparently satisfied with his subordinates’ attack on the retreating animals, Pujol gave a nod before suddenly turning to Xavier.

“Lord Xavier, I saw your men advancing on the leftmost flank. I will take command here, so you should go and retrieve them.”

“Understood, sir. My thanks. Josep.”

“Yes, sir, leave the escort to me.”

Xavier’s answer was reflexive, and he took Josep with him, moving quickly towards the indicated area. Running carefully to avoid tripping, he couldn’t help but shudder.

I was watching from the back and missed my men’s movement. General Pujol was right in the thick of it and yet he noticed. How observant is he?

A commander taking to the front lines was usually frowned upon, but not every battle allowed one to observe from the back and issue orders. One needed to be able to grasp the composition of the battlefield even in the middle of a melee or he would not be fit to call himself a commander.

“Men, cease pursuit!” Xavier called to his subordinates. “You’re progressing alone! Going further is dangerous!”

Even as he reprimanded them, he was once more made aware that his goal was a distant one.

Chapter 3 — The Boundary Between Kindness and Ambition

Noon several days later found Zenjirou meeting with Princess Freya in a room of the Valentian Ducal Estate for the second time. His temporary aide, Raffaello Márquez, had been coordinating with her in the interim.

This was officially a luncheon to foster friendship but with a strong undercurrent of being an unofficial chance to make their final checks. Naturally, while Zenjirou had no intention of running roughshod over all the work Raffaello had done thus far, he had the right to demand that everything be started anew, so while everyone was smiling, there was still a distinct air of nervousness.

“I see.” Zenjirou nodded between forkfuls of the dish before them—a meal of raw fish with a citrus dressing. “Intercontinental travel is far more dangerous than I had imagined. I must respect your courage and decisiveness in setting out on such a voyage.”

The princess had been officially recognized as royalty from the Northern Continent at this point, so Zenjirou was more polite. It was a tone he was more used to taking than talking down to people and so was a welcome change for him.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. However, I was simply acting on my own desires and should frankly not be praised for it. My father and brother are constantly scolding me for it, to be honest,” she answered, bringing a spoonful of a common Capuan dish—a spicy soup of drake meat—to her mouth and sticking her tongue out slightly.

Considering her position within the royal family, she would most definitely come under the heading of “problem child.” Uppasala’s princess had taken on the role of captain and headed off on a voyage across the seas. Zenjirou could picture all too well the royals back in her homeland with their heads in their hands, although her current appearance, clad in an aqua dress with a gentle smile on her face, made it more difficult to imagine.

“Even so, your actions will be of great benefit to the country, and I am sure no one can deny that,” he told her.

“I certainly hope so beyond all else. My heart almost stopped when the tempest took us. It feels like a blessing, though, when I consider that it brought us here.”

Zenjirou nodded back at her exaggerated statement of good fortune, a smile plastered onto his face.

“Certainly, should we establish trade between our two countries, both of us can only stand to gain.”

Rafaello had informed him that Freya’s homeland—the Kingdom of Uppasala—was in the same position as Capua in regard to intercontinental trade. It was situated in the farthest northern reaches of the continent and had no direct intercontinental trade at present. They simply used intermediaries on the Northern Continent who *did* have trade links.

It was almost a mirror image of Capua’s situation. Capua was in the middle-west area of the continent, and their trade with the Northern Continent took place through northern intermediaries. If the two countries could establish a direct trade route, that would be of immense value to both parties.

“However, there are still unavoidable impediments to the formation of such a trade agreement between our lands.”

Despite Zenjirou’s grave expression, Freya looked questioningly at him and disagreed. “Do you think so? Personally, I would say that our lands are the two countries with the fewest impediments to forming such an agreement.”

Both of them stopped eating and surveyed each other wordlessly. The “impediments” each of them were speaking of were different things. What Zenjirou saw as an impediment was simply the distance between Capua and Uppasala. The Northern and Southern Continents were not linked like North and South America on Earth, nor were they separated by gentle, sheltered seas like Europe and Africa. There was a vast ocean between them, wider than half of the Southern Continent, in fact. Therefore even the shortest distance between the two, from the Northern Continent’s south cape to the Southern Continent’s north cape were far from linked.

That was why the majority of the already limited international trade took place between the northern countries in the Southern Continent and the southern lands of the Northern Continent. The shipping lanes between the two regions were tough enough, but taking into account Uppasala's location in the far north and Capua being in the midwest, the difficulty would be on another level. Without a ship of a similar class to *Glafir's Leaf*, even attempting it was absurd.

"Indeed, should we solve the simplest yet hardest to overcome problems, little will stand in our way," Zenjirou agreed with a purposeful sigh to make his reluctance clear.

"I appreciate your understanding."

The hindrances that Freya was talking about were trade frictions between their neighboring countries. From Capua's perspective, it would be physically far less of a concern to cooperate with southern countries on the other continent as opposed to going all the way to the north for Uppasala. Uppasala was also at least slightly closer to the north of this continent than to Capua.

However, much of these regions were already engaged in intercontinental trade. If Capua and Uppasala were to express an interest in inclusion, they would be competing for a slice of the existing pie. It would inevitably lead to them being in a weaker position as they played catch-up. However, if the two countries leapfrogged those already trading and formed direct agreements, it would keep the diplomatic issues of trade frictions to a minimum.

Capua was one of the strongest countries on the Southern Continent, while Uppasala was well-known for technological superiority on their own continent. They were both suitable trade partners for each other.

The problem was, as Zenjirou had said, would they even be able to establish trade?

"Whatever the case, we shall shoulder the burden of your ship's repairs. Once you are able to return home, we will have established that a round trip between our lands is at least possible, albeit not easy. Our prospects will be better then."

"Quite. I cannot thank you enough for your kindness, Your Majesty," the

princess stated with a bow of her head, returning her silver spoon to the table.

The preliminary negotiations through Rafaello had already established that Capua would foot the bill for the ship's repairs. Naturally, the shipwrights on board would be responsible for overseeing the repair work itself. Yet, the bulk of the workforce would be Valentian shipwrights, or else craftsmen from Márquez County. The attainment of knowledge of multiple-masted ships was practically a *fait accompli* for Capua.

It would, of course, take years of trial and error before Capua could create these larger ships on its own. Building up crews to sail them without issue would also take vast sums of time and money. Regardless, the fact remained that Northern technology was spreading to the South.

Now that the ship's repair was confirmed, Zenjirou ate another forkful of food—his meal, citrus-dressed fish tartare, was a local specialty, but people from out of the area weren't too fond of it, so he was the only one present eating it—and brought the next topic to the table.

"It is nothing that requires thanks," he told her. "However, now that we are moving towards its repair, should the cargo truly remain within the hold?"

Freya's smile remained on her face as she answered, straightening slightly. "Yes, while the physical movement of it will have to wait, perhaps we could start in name at least."

"I am under the impression that your load is steel and woolen goods, correct?"

Freya nodded. "It is. The majority is woolen goods, while the steel is a small amount compared to the full inventory."

Woolen goods were an export that fetched a good price even on the Southern Continent. They were, as the name implied, fabrics created from the wool of animals. Animals such as goats and sheep that could be sheared for wool were almost non-existent on the Southern Continent, so they were valuable fabrics.

As for the metal, while the Northern techniques were more advanced, if the quality wasn't a concern, then they were attainable domestically. The wool had

a higher profit margin considering the weight limits their cargo operated under.

Zenjirou had his notes from Aura concerning the purchase of their goods, and he had already talked to Rafaello about it as well.

“We are happy to buy your entire cargo. If you wish to trade for sugar and spices, we will exchange at better than the market rate.”

Thanks to his preparation, he didn't falter in delivering the offer. The rate had already been set between Rafaello and Freya, and Zenjirou had simply been made aware of it. He had had the governor, Damian, show him the market prices for sugar and spices in Valentia for the past three years, just in case, and the value had not been too dissimilar.

It felt like too good of a deal to him, but they needed Freya to be able to use this transaction to convince her father and brother back home to make the trade agreement a permanent one. From that perspective, it was probably a fair price. There were limits to the supplies of each, and Zenjirou was sure that taking into account internal demand and the continuation of their intercontinental trade meant that this would be a one-time deal.

Unknowing of his thoughts, the princess's snow-white face broke into a soft smile as she gave a slight nod that set her short silver-blue hair swaying.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. In that case, we would like to exchange a tenth of our goods for coin and the rest for goods in turn. We would of course like the sugar and spices, but we would also appreciate you providing us with drake hide and bones.”

“Hmm, drake hide and bones?”

Despite already knowing of her request, he still looked askance at her. Rafaello had reacted similarly in the preliminary negotiations. Drake items were used and valued in the Southern Continent for their utility in making weapons and armor, but there was a lack of demand for them on the Northern Continent.

Yet Freya wanted them in the same way that anyone on the Southern Continent would. What was the difference between her and others from the North? Rafaello had suggested that until they could establish that, they should

not enter any specific arrangements, and Zenjirou had agreed.

“We have had little success in exporting those thus far, so I cannot guarantee we have sufficient quantity or quality for what you desire.”

“I see. That’s a shame,” was all she said as she stopped pursuing the topic and withdrew her request.

The meal continued wordlessly for a while; the only sound was the slight clinking of the cutlery. Octavia’s efforts had instilled in Zenjirou the bare minimum of etiquette for a royal. Even so, he didn’t have the composure to slowly savor his food with the situation as it was.

“Princess Freya, how are you finding the cuisine here? I do hope it suits your tastes,” he said, bringing up a relatively safe topic as he decided he would be a failure as a host if he allowed the silence to continue.

Freya answered while skillfully manipulating her knife and fork to cut the spiced meat from its bone. “It does. Every dish is a fresh, delicious experience,” she answered, also carefully.

Her answer was no lie, although, no matter how well prepared a dish was, it still might not have fit her tastes. In fact, none of Freya’s party had touched the Valentian special of raw fish that Zenjirou was currently enjoying. People tended to eventually miss their food from home.

“You do not wish for your own meals? I imagine there must be significant differences in the cuisine on the Northern Continent,” he pressed.

Freya’s pale shoulders shifted in a shrug from where her dress let them peek out. “I thank you for your concern. You need not worry, however. We have goats and chickens on board our ship, along with the ship’s chef. If the need overwhelms me, I can eat my country’s food, though as you might expect, nothing can be done about the vegetables.”

Zenjirou started when he heard that there were goats and chickens on board. “You have goats and chickens?” he asked. “Are they...well, alive?”

Freya seemed surprised by Zenjirou’s shock and hopeful reply but soon seemed to understand and smiled.

“Of course. However, the goats are not suitable for shearing as you may wish, Your Majesty. The coats of goats brought this far to the Southern Continent degrade and are unsuitable for wool.”

While this was the first ship directly from Uppasala to the Southern Continent, and they were therefore acting on hearsay, Freya knew that a lot of the people here wanted goats of their own. After all, if they could raise the numbers nearby, they would eventually be able to produce their own wool. It was a natural line of thought to follow.

However, things were not as easy as they seemed. Goats were creatures that originally lived in cold places at high altitudes. Despite that, they were extremely adaptable for herbivores and could subsist on very simple diets. Goats raised in cold temperatures at high altitudes tended to have thicker coats. The breeds that could be taken this far south had no coat worthy of using.

“That is no issue; the milk is what I’m after.”

He’d heard that goat’s milk had a different flavor and odor to cow’s, but it would suffice well enough as a substitute. His aim was less the milk itself and more the derivative dairy products. He remembered seeing butter and cheese made from goat’s milk in the past and should therefore be able to make such products from goat’s milk as well. Of course, he didn’t know *how* and would likely need to rely on Freya’s retinue for that information.

But contrary to Zenjirou’s sparkling eyes, Freya’s voice took on a note of caution. “You intend to imbibe goat’s milk, Your Majesty?”

A chill ran down his back at her question. Perhaps he had been too hasty. However, there was no taking back his remark now. Fortunately, the meal was just an unofficial lunch meeting. He decided to push it as a personal taste of his as he did his utmost to keep his expression composed.

“I do. Is it perhaps abnormal to do so in your country?”

“Not at all. Goat’s milk is an important source of nutrition for every citizen in the country. It is, of course, drunk as it is, but needs to be preserved for the winter by using it in products such as butter, cheese, and filmjölök.”

Consuming goat's milk was entirely natural to someone from Uppasala. Freya's surprise stemmed from the fact that Zenjirou—a citizen of the Southern Continent—would suggest it. The South had no mammalian livestock, so people who lived there would not consume the milk of such animals, nor dairy products derived from it. It led to a strong reluctance to do so, in fact.

Beyond that, goat's meat was often refused by people in the South because it had a stench, or else the flavor wasn't to their liking. All of this meant that Freya had judged that goats which could not be sheared for wool would be worthless to people of the Southern Continent. Clearly, that wasn't the case.

Ah, I seem to remember his background, she thought, recalling the rumors of his origins, which she had heard over the past few days, and suddenly coming up with a possibility. *It seems worth investigating.*

The Northern princess allowed no sign of her thoughts to show as she replied with a smile, "They are a valuable commodity for our voyage, but if you have your heart set on them, I am prepared to allow some flexibility."

"Thank you. Despite the rudeness of the request, I would appreciate a number of both males and females so it would be possible to breed them here."

"That should be possible. We naturally have females, but we also have a sufficient number of males."

The animals were chosen for long voyages due to their relatively small stature, simple diets, and adaptability. On the other hand, they had short lifespans. They matured quickly in respect to that lifespan and so were easier to breed. This was an advantage for normal livestock but could lead to difficulties for dairy herds.

Goats of this world matured at anywhere between half a year at the earliest and a year at the latest, and were then capable of pregnancy. That also meant that to wean them, the mother would stop lactating after approximately half a year. Some voyages could take years, which meant that only bringing females for milk would result in the supply eventually being cut off. To avoid that, males were brought along for mating purposes and allowed to breed each time the females were in season. The offspring could then be raised as part of the next generation if the leeway was there. If not, it was somewhat of a shame, but

they could still be slaughtered for their meat.

“I see. Then please carry out this trade between the two of us as individuals. I will be sure to compensate you fairly.”

Fortunately, he had been allotted a sum of money by Aura for anything he wished to buy for himself. He had been his usual humble self and initially refused it once he saw the amount. “All I need to do is buy gifts for you and our visitors from the Twin Kingdoms,” he had said. Regardless, Aura had practically forced the money on him. In retrospect, it had been the correct decision, and it brought him no small relief now.

“You can rely on me, Your Majesty. If you are planning to increase their numbers through breeding, then relatively young specimens would be best.”

Even though they were speaking about livestock, it involved some rather crude words like “breeding” and “mating.” However, Freya showed no particular sign of reticence when it came to uttering the words despite her refined appearance. There was no shame on her face as she answered plainly and with a smile.

Ack, the conversation’s going a bit off course from what should be said around the dinner table—and with a princess too.

Zenjirou felt the conversation gradually slipping into the realms of perversion and gave an exaggerated clearing of his throat as he cast around for a smooth change of subject. Faster than he could think of one, though, Freya continued.

“Nicolai was the most willing to mate on our voyage, but I cannot offer him —”

“Your highness!”

The warrior at her side could hold her peace no more and gave a quiet exclamation to cut off her liege. As it happened, Nicolai was not the name of a goat, but one of the young sailors on *Glasir’s Leaf*.

Freya seemed to realize the lasciviousness of her own words, and her cheeks reddened slightly as she hunched over in embarrassment.

“That was rather rude; please forget that,” she said.

Fortunately, only she and her bodyguard were aware of Nicolai's identity, so the extent of the slip stayed with them. While not quite understanding what had happened, Zenjirou could tell that he shouldn't touch on the topic any further and glossed over it with a smile.

"With this being a personal agreement, I cannot make any grand promises, so I would prefer to pay in cash, despite the crudeness of it. Would that be acceptable?"

"Indeed, although I would also be willing to accept sugar and spices," Freya said, nodding with a smile, taking advantage of the topic's progression.

"I am afraid those are not under my discretion. The budget Her Majesty has given me personally is only in coin, so I would prefer that," he told her frankly.

"Very well, then," Freya agreed, her smile unfaltering. However, the warrior at her side couldn't hide the scorn from her gaze for a moment as she directed it towards him.

It was hardly surprising. He had essentially said, "I can't do anything without my wife's permission, and I can only pay with the allowance she's given me." It was a rather pathetic stance for a man to take with his position as both the queen's husband and a royal who held lineal magic in his own right.

Yet, even as her bodyguard dismissed his worth, Freya continued the conversation with a smile. "That reminds me, I have heard that you and Her Majesty have a child?"

"We do. He's just adorable."

"Allow me to offer my congratulations. Is he already a year old?"

"Not quite; it has only been about half a year."

"In that case, I would like to offer the goats as a somewhat delayed celebration of his birth. Our country has a tradition of offering livestock as a gift for a child's birth. Right, Skaji?"

"That is so," the warrior answered, slightly surprised by the conversation suddenly turning her way but quickly affirming her liege's words.

It was the truth; livestock was a common gift for the birth of children in

Uppasala. Of course, goats would mostly be used by wealthy commoners, while royalty would offer heavy warhorses, reindeer, or similar. Regardless, with it being a gift, it would be rude for Zenjirou to refuse it.

“Thank you. I shall ensure that your words are relayed to Her Majesty in the capital,” he answered with a smile, causing Freya’s smile to widen a bit.

“Not at all. If anything, I apologize for our journey meaning our gift is so lacking. Ordinarily, I would have preferred to have one of our smiths forge you a sword. Is there a weapon you are particularly skilled with?”

Zenjirou’s smile took on a self-deprecating air as he answered. “I’m afraid not. Unfortunately, I am wholly unsuited to battle and cannot wield a weapon.”

His values from modern Japan meant that he had no real shame in his lack of martial ability, but most young male nobles and royals in this world had some measure of combat skill. The atmosphere seemed like it would become slightly awkward for a moment, but Freya continued before that could happen.

“I see, then pardon my asking. I wonder if you are aware, in my country, a surprising number of warriors have knitting as a hobby. Many of them are also fishermen, but with the lack of sailing in the winter, they need something they can do at home.”

It was also customary for a warrior to maintain his or her own armor, so it was a surprising truth that many of them had a large amount of experience in leatherworking and chain mail repair, along with the use of both sewing and knitting needles.

“I see. That is quite interesting. Is the lack of sailing due to the ports freezing over?”

Zenjirou could tell that Freya was trying to move on from her gaffe and willingly took up the topic. It was an amusing image to think of: burly Swedish men hunched in their homes and clacking away with their knitting needles. Almost like a knitting bear he’d seen in a picture book as a child.

“No. Fortunately, our ports don’t freeze. Merchant ships come and go throughout the winter, but it *is* wickedly cold, so fishing only happens on days when the waves are unusually calm for winter.”

When temperatures were twenty below and even the sea was below zero, just the ocean spray and breeze could place your life in danger. The requisite thick clothing to defend against the cold also made it more difficult to work. If someone happened to fall into the waves, the shock would kill them before they drowned.

“Ah, I suppose that being tempered by such harsh conditions is one of the reasons your warriors are so strong.”

“Thank you. I have also heard that Capua’s warriors are wonderful themselves. It is said that their contributions in the great war were superb.”

“Quite true, although I had yet to arrive then, so I only have hearsay to go on. They serve as both the country’s shield and spear.”

“Word of the war engulfing the Southern Continent reached even our Northern lands. I heard that many people lost their homes, and multitudes of children lost their parents. I would like to be of some help to them,” Freya offered.

“I thank you for your offer, but our domestic refugees and orphans are all subjects of this country. All of Capua under Her Majesty has a responsibility to them, so you need not be concerned.”

Both Freya and Zenjirou continued their meal gracefully, enjoying their conversation with smiles on their faces.

“I see. Perhaps I was too forward.”

“Not at all. I cannot thank you enough for your sympathies. However, Queen Aura is of the opinion that we as a country have a responsibility to each and every one of our citizens. Those words will never be overturned, so I would appreciate your understanding in the matter.”

“Very well. I can only offer my deepest respect to the queen’s noble heart.”

Thus the lunch progressed, a pleasant atmosphere prevailing throughout.



Immediately afterwards, Freya returned to her room and took a bath. Even after so long, she lamented the loss of her silvery-blue locks—one of the

features she was most proud of—which she had sacrificed in order to take on the captaincy. However, she always appreciated the comfort of shorter hair following her bath.

Since taking up residence in Valentia, Freya had started bathing three times a day. If she still had her waist-length hair she would have doubtless been unable to do so as freely.

Using a sheet of absorbent cotton to dry her hair, she sat on the sofa. She was wearing only a plain, sleeveless dress over her underwear and was going barefoot. Her casualness was permissible due to the fact that the only person sharing the room was her trusted bodyguard. Freya spread her legs to the absolute limit of politeness and let out a big sigh.

“Truly, the weather in this country is like being in a sauna,” she grumbled. “I can understand the cultural tendency towards going barefoot or with slippers inside.”

“Have some water, Princess.”

“Thanks, Skaji.”

Freya drained the offered silver cup in one go. Such actions were perhaps those of a woman with looser morals, but she couldn’t resist the charms of freshly drawn water from the well.

“Phew...”

The Northern princess had cooled down once more, even internally after bathing in the cold water and then drinking it, and her sigh was one of finally getting comfortable.

“We now have prospects for both repair of our ship and at least minimal trade,” she added.

“We do. Congratulations, Your Highness.”

The warrior sat on the opposite sofa as they started discussing the lunch. Skaji was both her bodyguard and confidant. When no one else was around, they would sit together on the same level and talk. Of course, the difference in their heights meant that they weren’t strictly speaking on the “same level,” even

sitting down like this.

“I had heard tales, but the profit to be gained from international trade is vaster than I expected. At these rates, we would still gain even if only one ship in three were to return.”

“Sugar and spices are a luxury for us. In the same way, woolen goods are the same here.”

Buying low and selling high was the fundamental of trade, but the difference in purchase and sale price between the two continents was obscene. Supply and demand would naturally see that difference decrease when a trade route was established, but there was plenty of time before that happened.

Freya crossed her legs where she sat atop the sofa in her short dress. “The engineering of our larger ships will most definitely leak, but that’s unavoidable. I do want to get hold of drake leather and bone to strengthen our military, but they evaded us there.”

“Truly, I didn’t think the church’s influence had spread this far. Not that we are under their influence.”

Freya gave a rueful smile as her bodyguard frowned. “I suppose the Southerners can’t tell us apart. We can probably avoid misunderstandings with a detailed explanation, but I would rather not spread it around too much.”

The church was a religious organization that spanned the width of the Northern Continent, worshipping the ancient wyrms that were said to exist. Their teachings held that the reptiles alive today were descendants of those ancient wyrms, so the church’s followers saw them as holy. Therefore only a small number of soldiers in countries where the church had influence were permitted to use equipment derived from those creatures.

They also claimed that those living on the Southern Continent had incited the ancient wyrms’ rage and been banished there, forbidding the spread of the North’s advanced technology.

It was all baseless, of course, but strangely accepted across the Northern Continent, and the church had more influence than even the royal family in several countries. However, they had an exceptionally small influence on

Freya's homeland. Her crew, therefore, had very little resistance to the idea of importing drake hide or bones.

The Southerners didn't know these nuances, however, and treated even Uppasala—another animistic country—the same as any other Northern country under the church's influence.

"Making sure our position is understood will likely take quite an amount of negotiation," her bodyguard replied.

"The question is whether drake parts make it worth doing. Fortunately, it will take some time before *Glafir's Leaf* is fully repaired, so I can continue discussing it with His Majesty."

Her bodyguard looked aghast at the princess's conclusion.

"With *His Majesty*?" she asked. "Not Lord Rafaello?"

Freya had likely expected such a reaction as she corrected her confidant's assumption with a slight smile and a meaningful tone. "That's right. Do you see him as simple window dressing?"

Freya's opinion was quite clearly contrary to her smile, but with no one else around, there was no need to dance around the subject.

"I do. He is simple window dressing who happens to carry royal blood and be the queen's husband. At the very least, he seems to lack all sign of wit or drive," the warrior answered bluntly. The memory foremost in her mind was his smile when he had admitted he couldn't fight. Her values saw that as the greatest possible detriment.

Freya shook her head slowly, the words being just what she had expected.

"You're wrong. His Majesty is undoubtedly not a normal person. I do not mean that he is some great figure, but for better or worse, he is outside the norm."

"What do you mean?" The warrior was familiar with her liege's love of ambiguity and questioned her further without hesitation.

"His origins are abnormal. I am sure you've heard the rumors? Those that state he was born in another country."

“I have. I seem to recall that Queen Aura summoned him with her lineal magic from a far-off land,” Skaji answered, casting her eyes to the ceiling as she thought back.

Her general knowledge of the prince consort didn’t include that he had been summoned from another *world*. It wasn’t that they had specifically hidden it, but the ordinary citizens had no concept of parallel worlds and so found it difficult to understand. Therefore it was generally understood that Zenjirou had been summoned from distant lands that one wouldn’t be able to reach even with a lifetime of travel.

“Indeed. I doubted it myself at first, but it seems to be the truth. His Majesty was clearly raised in a culture other than that of the Southern Continent. The very fact that he wanted goats for milk is proof of that.”

“I see. That follows,” Skaji agreed, accepting the explanation.

After a certain age, your tastes solidified and didn’t particularly change. Livestock on the Southern Continent was, without exception, made up of drakes—that is, large reptiles. Therefore the people who lived there had no taste for Northern livestock’s milk. Or, indeed, for any dairy products.

However, Zenjirou’s attitude had clearly changed once he knew about the living goats. There was a strong possibility that the change had been due to the culture where he was raised enjoying both milk and dairy products.

“That isn’t all. Do you remember when we discussed his child, he said that the prince wasn’t yet a year old because it had only been half a year?”

“Oh?” Skaji voiced in obvious confusion. “That *is* strange. Countries on the Southern Continent all count their children’s ages from one.”

“Further, the number ‘zero’ shouldn’t exist on this continent. Yet His Majesty didn’t recognize his son as being one year old because a whole year hadn’t passed.”

“The way he counts age is more like the Northern Continent’s than the Southern. The calendar he follows may even be similar.”

Fundamentally, age on the Southern Continent was counted following the method where a newborn was one year old at birth, and each year, one was

added to that count. Therefore it was impossible there for a child to “not yet be one.”

Freya put her hand to her mouth and pondered. “It seems possible,” she decided. “Perhaps he was brought up on the Northern Continent. Do you remember that he naturally made an assumption that our ports would freeze?”

Capua was practically in a perpetual state of summer, but it had exceptionally high mountains farther inland, so they still had words for snow and ice. However, those words only applied to places high enough to give you altitude sickness, and someone from the Southern Continent would be unable to imagine the sea itself freezing. Even many in the southernmost reaches of the Northern Continent didn’t know that could happen.

“I see. You followed so neatly that I didn’t think it strange, but listing it like that does show a surprising amount of our knowledge and culture. I can at the very least agree that he is abnormal,” the warrior admitted.

Despite her words, she showed no sign of re-evaluating the prince consort. In her eyes, a little knowledge wasn’t enough to raise the worth of a man who could not fight.

The princess could almost read her confidant’s mind and added to what she’d said with a smile. “That isn’t everything, of course. His Majesty is without a doubt the most important member of these talks. All the rights to make a decision lie with him.”

Even so, the warrior looked at the princess doubtfully. “I know, but is that not just a formality? The entire conversation earlier was what you had already agreed upon with Lord Rafaello. The only exception was the negotiations for the livestock, but that didn’t show any particular wit.”

That was, of course, Skaji’s personal view, but Freya had a different opinion.

“True, I do not think he has any particularly astounding skill. However, he has a clear understanding of the negotiations. He is both perceptive and decisive and has the final say, so we must keep our attention on him.”

In truth, neither of their evaluations were quite right. However, both contained elements of the truth. Freya was correct in that Zenjirou had the final

decision about whether things would proceed or not. However, Skaji was also right in that it was most likely a formality and he would simply sign what needed to be signed as long as there was nothing extreme in it.

Zenjirou's position was that of a spokesperson for the queen. His words were her words, and his will was hers. He would fill his role and answer his wife's expectations. However, he would avoid improving his own reputation by doing so and behave in such a way as to avoid being thought of as competent to the extent possible.

His behavior was bizarre, on both the Southern and Northern Continents. Freya and Skaji had only met him a few times now, so it was no surprise they didn't understand that. However, Freya had ascertained several things during their lunch.

"He is fundamentally a decisive person. You can take his agreement to my refusing payment for the goats as proof of that, would you not agree? While he only has a set amount of money to use at his discretion, accepting gifts from a foreign dignitary is a completely different matter. I imagine it was something they didn't foresee. Regardless, he accepted the suggestion naturally and on the spot. He must have weighed the pros and cons of accepting my gift, and likewise for refusing, before making a decision."

Skaji waited a moment and then asked, "Are you sure he didn't just leap at the chance to get something he wanted?"

Freya didn't deny her confidant's doubt. "The possibility is there, to be sure. However, I feel safer overestimating my partner in any negotiation rather than underestimating them."

The best option would be to neither over nor underestimate the other party and instead develop an accurate evaluation. But that was rather difficult, so Freya decided to err on the side of caution until things were clear.

"Very well. I think your concern is excessive, but proceeding carefully is hardly a bad idea in our position," Skaji agreed.

Overestimating Zenjirou meant that they wouldn't let their guard down until negotiations were complete, but it also meant forgoing opportunities for bold action. However, the only route home they had required Capua's aid to repair.

If they went too far, they could be driven into a corner.

Freya's smile vanished from her face as her eyes narrowed with yet another thought. "Besides, I was given a remonstration. Considering his answer, I am sure he is far from mere window dressing."

As she spoke, she remembered their "chat" at the end of the meeting. Freya had hinted about wishing to take some of the refugees and orphans the prior war had doubtless birthed. And yet Zenjirou had immediately intuited her aim and bluntly refused her.

"If we could have returned with some of those blessed with mana from this continent, we would have been able to slow the decline of mana in our lands," she added in disappointment.

There were several areas of concern in Uppasala, but one of them was the low average level of mana amongst their people. There were many opinions about why that might be, but Freya believed it was due to the advancement of technology leading to magic becoming less important.

The amount of mana that someone possessed was passed down in the same way as physical traits. Both continents were fully aware of that. It meant that where mages were in high demand on the Southern Continent, and skilled mages had many paths opened to them, marrying someone for the amount of mana they had could give one an advantage.

Conversely, technology had progressed on the Northern Continent, so there was less of a need for magic, and the custom of taking the amount of mana into account when it came to marriage faded away. Commoners would marry for character and ability, warriors for strength and combat skill, and the aristocracy for social standing and connections. All of these factors were prioritized over mana, and when the practice was repeated across an entire country for generations, it led to a large difference in the average amount of mana users when compared to the Southern Continent where it was prized.

That was Freya's thought process. There was no guarantee it was correct, but Freya thought it stood a good chance of being true.

"Judging from how he acted, taking any of their citizens home will result in a complete breakdown of diplomatic relations. It's a shame."

She remembered his attitude making it clear that he, in Aura’s name, would not allow their citizens to be taken from them by anyone, and let out a sigh. She felt the disappointment keenly. They’d had the good fortune of their stocks of food allowing them to return home even without a single animal on board. If they could have picked up some people from the Southern Continent, she wouldn’t have minded leaving behind every single animal in the hold. If she could have filled all that space with humans, that alone would have made the trip a resounding success. Her father and brother, despite their reluctance to allow her voyage, would have had no end of praise for her.

“It really is a shame,” she mumbled, still unable to move on from it due to knowing what the result would have been.



Meanwhile, Zenjirou was spending his time after the meal in the duke’s office and briefing his temporary aide, Rafaello Márquez.

Immediately following his discussion with Freya, where he’d been unable to catch his breath, with a briefing like this was tiring. Officially, though, his time with the princess had been his lunch break, so his schedule didn’t *feel* packed.

Present in the office were Zenjirou, Rafaello, and Ines the maid. While Capua was always hot, now that the hottest period of the year had passed, the room temperature was below body temperature. A cool sea breeze blew in through the open window, and bright sunlight streamed in. The wind brought a sense of relief to Zenjirou’s face and neck as he remained in his fitted uniform.

He took a sip from the cold tea that Ines had brought before beginning to speak.

“Our agreements with Princess Freya are now mostly complete. Are there any problems remaining?”

Rafaello’s ever-present soft smile didn’t change as he immediately replied, “There are no problems. Your aid will mean that further negotiations will be much easier. Thank you, sir.”

Zenjirou breathed an internal sigh of relief as the man gave a polite bow of his head. Keeping his expression fixed, Zenjirou answered.

“I see. Then can I assume her ship will be repaired without incident?”

If they couldn't manage that, all their plans for obtaining techniques for building bigger ships and establishing intercontinental trade would come to nothing.

Rafaello gave a confident nod. “It will. Shipwrights from both Valentia and *Glasisr's Leaf* have finished their preliminary meetings. The on-board shipwrights stated that it is repairable in Valentia's port, although it seems it will require three ordinary-sized docks.”

That would be no issue. Neither man was familiar with ships, so if the specialists gave their approval, they simply had to trust it.

“Would you be interested in taking a look before the repairs?” Rafaello asked.

With the aforementioned understanding in place, Zenjirou didn't immediately refuse because he was rather interested in the ship itself. It was a wooden ship, still sailing, that took intercontinental voyages. There was no way he wouldn't be intrigued.

“Would my visit distract the repairs?” he asked, understanding his societal position. An unexpected visit from someone on the level of a prince consort could certainly get in the way of the people on the ground trying to get the work done.

However, Rafaello's smile didn't falter as he shook his head. “It will not,” he assured him. “The preliminary planning is already done, and they are currently making adjustments to start in earnest. No real work is being done on the ship itself. The dockworkers will have begun their tasks, but as long as they are not interrupted, there should be no delays.”

Capua's culture placed a relatively large importance on practicality for the level of advancement they were at. While Zenjirou was unaware of it, even a visit from royalty would not prevent workers from continuing with their jobs unless they were called on directly.

With the explanation given, he could no longer resist his curiosity. “Very well, then. I shall take a look. Pick a day where it will have the least impact on the work.”

“I shall do so, sir.”

Rafaello’s smile seemed to take on a slight air of amusement, but that might have just been Zenjirou’s paranoia. Either way, focusing on things like that would be no help, so he soon regrouped and moved on to the next topic.

“I assume their forge technology is off the table?”

Obtaining information on Uppasala’s forges was on Aura’s list, but was not the be-all and end-all. With her putting such effort into glass manufacturing, details of forges that could withstand high temperatures was indispensable. It was common knowledge that the Northern Continent’s technological advancements were far ahead of their southern neighbor. If Freya’s words were correct, Uppasala was even more advanced than average in blacksmithing, even for the North. Therefore, they would surely have better forges than Capua.

Rafaello gave a slightly disappointed sigh, though, and shook his head. “It is. They only have people on board who can maintain their weapons and make ammunition, not full-fledged smiths. Even if they had the latter, it seems that smithing items from metal, refining the ore, and creating forges are all separate professions.”

That was fairly obvious in retrospect. As techniques advanced, workers became ever more specialized. There were a precious few who insisted on overseeing the construction of their forge, examining the ore, shaping it, and then shaping it under their own power, but they were both a country’s greatest treasure and exceedingly rare.

There was no chance that one of them would have been on *Glasisr’s Leaf*, and even if trade was established between the two nations, there was practically no possibility of such a smith coming this far south.

“It would be for the best to assume there may be possible inroads if intercontinental trade goes according to plan, but that it is impossible at the present moment,” Rafaello explained plainly in his soft tone.

“I see,” Zenjirou said, accepting his words without disappointment. It was a shame but he hadn’t really been expecting it to begin with. “Then put those negotiations on hold. If it is unlikely to be resolved in the next few days, I shall directly consult Her Majesty for a decision.”

“Very well, sir.”

Zenjirou cast a glance at the other man as he answered briskly and thought, *He truly is capable. Almost too capable; it makes me feel like it's my own skill when I'm just directing him. It's a little scary, to be honest.*

If he were to give an order like, “With this and that as conditions, carry out the negotiation” or “inquire about this and that,” Rafaello would deliver a concise report within a few days. Naturally, if negotiations didn't go well, that was that. However, one of Rafaello's skills was to be able to report with, “They seem to have no intention of pursuing this further” or “I fear that attempting to gather more information will reveal our aims,” and inquire for more precise direction.

Therefore, Zenjirou was provided with several concise options and an accurate prediction of what each could result in. All he then had to do was choose from those which would best serve Aura's interests. It was nothing as extreme as diplomacy. It was more like playing an adventure game with a hint system.

He might look plain, but he can negotiate and has the perception and judgment to suit. The problem is his lack of decisiveness. Actually...maybe it's more like avoiding taking responsibility?

That was his evaluation of the highly ranked noble in front of him. The man was, if Zenjirou said so himself, an extremely capable civil official. He would carry out the work he was entrusted with perfectly but wouldn't act unless a superior ordered it. He always maintained a position where the final responsibility wouldn't rest with him but rather stopped with someone else.

“There are no other problems? Contact me immediately if anything unforeseen occurs. I will consult Her Majesty and convey her decision.”

Despite his stressing the words, it was about eighty percent false. As long as nothing extreme happened, he wouldn't actually need to consult Aura. Their planning in the capital was enough that as long as the decisions fell within the realm of what they had agreed upon, Zenjirou himself could make an immediate decision.

However, showing real decisiveness in making a decision could lead to

misunderstandings, so he wouldn't shun the appearance of consulting Aura beforehand.

“Very well. I understand, sir,” Raffaello answered with a polite bow, his soft smile still in place. It didn't matter if he was aware of the hidden facets between the queen and her consort.

Intermission 2 — Lingering Traces and Vanished Drakes

The efforts of both the royal army under General Pujol and the Gaziel March's army under Xavier Gaziel were showing their worth as the soldiers worked steadily towards ensuring the safety of the salt road.

They were arrayed around a hill in a semicircle—one hunter's advice was that this was likely to be the den of the large swarm raptor—and gradually tightening their formation.

It was easier said than done, of course. Each step from the road was a step into unexplored territory. The dense foliage meant they couldn't even take ten steps in a straight line, while the chest-high weeds would bite into any exposed skin. The vines crawling between the trees were tougher than they looked as they blocked the soldiers' path. Insects lurking in the undergrowth had stung multiple soldiers as well.

It was due to these obstacles that the men were wearing clothes they sweltered in: long sleeves and pants along with leather boots and gloves—similar to work gloves from Earth—as they silently swung their sickles.

It went without saying that Capua was hot. While it was better at this time of year now that the hottest months had passed, the midday highs were still above thirty degrees. Under those conditions, with the only bare skin being their faces, even the highly trained soldiers grew fatigued from the endless hours of manual labor.

The repetitive cutting motion forced them to stay in a half-stooped posture and was harder work than anyone who hadn't experienced it could imagine. The heavy clothing meant that the sweat built up and soaked the material as well, which after an hour was several times its original weight.

The sweat must have also irritated their skin, as the soldiers frequently clawed at areas of their bodies with their free hands. Unfortunately, the thick

clothes and gloved hands meant that scratching didn't relieve the itching in the slightest.

Normally, such simple labor would have been aided by one of the best methods: singing. Singing as they worked would have kept them working to a rhythm and allowed them to—at least somewhat—forget the pain of their endeavor. However, with noise posing a risk, no singing was allowed here. After all, they were not tending plants—they were *hunting*. The true target of their blades was not the greenery, but the swarm raptor infestation. If they came together in song, the raptors, along with other aggressive drakes, could attack without their approach being noticed.

Thus, the only avenue they had to vent their stress as they were covered in sweat, mud, and plant matter was to quietly complain.

They were about halfway to their original target thanks to the mud-stained soldiers' efforts when it happened.

"What was that? Repeat yourself," General Pujol Guillén demanded of a pale-faced, bearded hunter with a glare.

The hunter could only manage a strangled gasp. The general had not intended any harm, but the hunter couldn't cope. After all, there was no one in Capua who did not know that man was both at the head of the country's army and the head of one of the leading noble families. He was also close to two meters tall, and his trained body weighed easily over a hundred kilos. One could hardly call fear in the face of a man—who held both the right and strength to kill you if the whim took him—glaring at you "cowardice."

Fortunately, the general understood the expression on the hunter's face.

"Mph..."

He could feel his brow start to furrow in displeasure but realized that such an expression would only worsen the situation, so he kept his face neutral before calling to the young noble behind him.

"Lord Xavier! I believe this man is one of your subordinates. Listen to what he has to say and then report to me."

You could perhaps call it an admission of defeat, but Pujol knew that the

scared man in front of him wouldn't be able to calm down. It was hardly surprising... However friendly a lion appeared, a deer or rabbit would never let their guard down.

"Understood, sir!" Xavier responded immediately and easily, having grown used to acting as the general's subordinate.

Later, General Pujol heard the hunter's report via Xavier Gaziel within their temporary command tent. The area had been a relatively clear section they had found while their hunt progressed and had been flattened via earth manipulation, with walls formed in the same way to create the tent, meaning the available space was very limited.

The room was packed with four people: Pujol, his adjutant, Xavier, and Knight Josep. Naturally, Pujol took up twice the space of the others.

"Give your report. Lord Xavier, you have information on the man from earlier?"

Xavier came to attention as Pujol questioned him from a chair formed through earth manipulation magic.

"Yes, sir. I managed to calm him down and get him to talk."

While the general was seated, the margrave-to-be was standing at attention. Somewhat sadly, their eyeline was still almost at the same level.

The general gave an almost rueful smile at Xavier's reply. "My apologies. I know that I put people ill at ease. I used to try to make things better, but I've long since given up now."

The general had features that could certainly be called handsome, but his face was a hard military man's without a hint of sweetness to those features. It meant that he had very few avenues through which to put his conversational partners at ease, and it was ultimately an area he struggled with.

Xavier cast around for a reply to the hero's complaints. "Ah, um, not at all. Everyone has their weaknesses."

The general noticed that his complaints were troubling the promising young man and immediately continued the conversation as if he had said nothing.

“Then let us hear the report. What was his information?”

Xavier straightened once more and began to speak with a serious expression. “He relayed that there is a strong possibility the swarm raptors have already left the area.”

The bearded hunter was highly skilled, and Xavier had brought him along from his own lands. There was no one else around who had more experience with wild drakes, including swarm raptors.

General Pujol was no fool, and he would not dismiss a specialist’s judgment easily. “I wonder whether this would count as expected or unexpected.”

Considering the general’s murmur, it was clear that even a layman like him had felt that something was out of place. When they had begun their hunt, they had encountered the swarm raptors relatively frequently. Recently, however, they had barely come across them.

A small amount of consideration revealed the strangeness of the situation. Their hunt was continuing by closing the semicircle formation. If there were raptors in the area they were encircling, it was strange for the encounter rate to drop, as it should have been *easier* to find them.

Xavier continued his explanation. “The feces, leftover food, claw marks, and footprints confirm that there were several hundred raptors in the area. There are anomalously large traces as well, so we can assume that the giant raptor was also hidden here. However, the encounter rate is dropping as we narrow the search area. In fact, we haven’t encountered a single one in the last three days. The hunter states that this is due to them having abandoned the mountain.”

Naturally, beasts would flee when cornered. Since the soldiers had been using a semicircle, it left an escape route, as it was difficult to completely encircle the area, but also because the bearded hunter had said that it would cause no issues. If that same hunter had been in the room with them, the general would likely have questioned him with such a sharp gaze that the man would have had a heart attack.

“Explain. As far as I was aware, there are very few areas that can support such a large amount of raptors with both sufficient food and space and they would

therefore refuse to abandon their territory unless something extreme occurred. Was that incorrect?”

This was the main reason they had compromised and chosen a semicircle formation. The logic was obvious in retrospect. Unexplored lands for humanity would naturally be full of many creatures, leading to vicious fights throughout the area. Feeding grounds, watering holes, and somewhere to lay eggs safely. Any area that fulfilled those conditions would inevitably be ruled over by strong drakes.

While the swarm raptors were both unusually strong for their kind and hunted in great numbers, they were not apex predators. There were creatures like brawn drakes, great drakes, and fang drakes, which the swarm raptors would never win against in a normal fight. Therefore, they would normally hang on to their territory to the bitter end, even when hunted by humans. They knew that fleeing into the trees would be no guarantee of survival.

Xavier swallowed nervously at the general’s tone but managed to keep any tremors from his voice as he replied. “No, sir. According to him, it is extremely rare, but swarm raptors will sometimes abandon both their food and water sources. If a creature they could never win against, such as an ancient wyvern or savage wyvern, were to lay claim to their territory, they would seek out new lands rather than fight an unwinnable battle.”

Even Pujol’s eyebrow rose at that. “You mean to say that a creature on the same level as an ancient or savage wyvern is in the area?”

That would be an extreme emergency, even more so than their current mission to subjugate the swarm raptors.

But Xavier shook his head. “No, he said that was impossible. The feces, tracks, claw marks, and leftover food indicate that the only carnivorous drakes around here are the swarm raptors.”

“Hmm...” Pujol mused, putting his chin in his hand.

Swarm raptors would rarely abandon their territory, and yet they had done exactly that. The examples given were if a more powerful creature came to take the territory for themselves. However, the only carnivorous drakes in the area seemed to be the swarm raptors themselves.

All the information was there, so the general came quickly to the correct conclusion. “In other words, that huge swarm raptor has evaluated us as unbeatable and fled?”

Xavier nodded. “Indeed. He said that while he cannot say that with certainty, he cannot think of another conclusion.”

The swarm raptors had initially treated the humans as prey, but after a harsh reprisal had abandoned their feeding grounds and fled. It could certainly be described as a beast’s response, but it was also far from the usual behavior of the raptors. But it was, perhaps, inevitable with them losing the battle here.

“Awfully decisive and quick to act. It would pass as one of my subordinates.”

Foes were more difficult when they knew to cut their losses and run.

Xavier, agreeing with the general’s evaluation, continued. “If we finish the hunt and find no more swarm raptors, then I think we will have to assume they have abandoned their territory. If that is the case, can we not call our duty fulfilled?”

“True, our role is not to eradicate the raptors but to ensure the road’s safety. If the swarm raptors are no longer encroaching on the salt road, that would certainly be a valid interpretation. Would there truly be no issues later, though? Would they not attempt to return once we leave?”

Xavier had assumed that Pujol would express that concern and had asked the hunter for his opinion on it, so he was able to answer immediately. “The possibility is there. However, there is a greater problem. Such invasions of territory could well cause the entire forest to riot.”

“Riot?” the general parroted.

“Indeed, territorial disputes do not always end between the invader and invaded. If the losing party dies, that’s all very well, but if not and they flee, it can cause another dispute elsewhere. If the same thing happens once more and the losing group does not die and travels to yet another location... This forms a chain and can continue endlessly.”

“We cannot deal with such a problem alone,” the general said with an irritated shrug of his wide shoulders.

With the possibility of the raptors' return, Pujol's group couldn't leave. If the fleeing raptors could cause the fighting to spread throughout the forest, they would have to report it to Aura. If the disruption were confined to the forest, that would be manageable, but if the unrest could spread to settlements, then it would become a grave concern.

Xavier's earlier statement about it being their duty to make the salt road safe was not incorrect. Yet, General Pujol was aware that as the highest-ranked general in the royal army, he was a pillar of Capua. With that in mind, he knew that fulfilling the letter of his duty was not the be-all and end-all of his role.

His thoughts whirled, and the veteran quickly settled on a conclusion. His gaze—sharp to begin with—grew all the more so as he spoke. “First, we will conclude our hunt as planned. It is not because I doubt your specialists, but this is not a minor enough situation to make a decision without absolute proof. So, Lord Xavier?”

“Yes, sir!”

“You are to take the hunter to the capital. You should be able to use your name to secure a direct audience with Her Majesty. Speak frankly and ask for her guidance.”

Even Xavier, wise for his age, couldn't hide his confusion at the unexpected order. “Yes, sir...but directly to the capital? A report would get there quicker via wyvern from a fort and my subordinates—”

“A wyvern would not work. The information is too complex, and it could lead to confusion. Passing on the information by word of mouth would also be a disadvantage. Her Majesty must hear it directly from the hunter. She is willing to compromise on matters such as this. As for your subordinates, leave them to your knight, Josep.”

Xavier could tell from the man's tone that this was not up for debate, and after a glance of mutual understanding with Josep at his side, he straightened and gave a salute.

“Understood, sir. I shall leave as soon as the hunt is complete.”

Pujol shook his head. “No, you should leave immediately. It is a race against

time. Once the hunt is complete, we will return to the fortress in the crownlands and send a wyvern. Considering the relative speeds of wyverns and dash drakes, it should arrive at approximately the same time. Naturally, I will mention your goal in the letter. It may arrive slightly before or after you, so make adjustments as necessary,” the general said.

Xavier understood that the “race against time” was no mere metaphor and once more saluted with a determined expression. “Understood, sir! I will leave at once!”

As if to underscore those words, he immediately departed the tent with quick steps.

Chapter 4 — Where the Chain Arrived

“Incredible. It’s absolutely astounding,” Zenjirou said in awe as he looked up at the four-masted ship.

It was Zenjirou’s first visit to the port since he had arrived in the city of Valentia. The ship, *Glafir’s Leaf*, was huge. In truth, its size was only in relation to this country’s common knowledge. The ferry Zenjirou had boarded during his elementary school trip was about twice as big, but the four towering masts of the ship couldn’t pass without comment.

The vessel was made entirely from wood, deck to hull. While it had been designed with practicality first, it was an amalgamation of functional beauty that would draw the eye of anyone who gazed upon it.

The impression it made on him was audible in his words.

“It is. Take a closer look, Your Majesty. This is the pride of our country, the *Glafir’s Leaf*,” Freya said with a proud smile from her position next to him, puffing her chest out.

The sea breeze was cooling, but the direct sunlight reflecting off the white stones meant that it was still plenty hot. Despite that, Freya showed no sign of giving in to the heat.

“It’s an incredible ship,” Zenjirou agreed. “Does it use two square sails and the same fore-and-aft?”

“Normally, yes. However, the advantage of the *Glafir’s Leaf* is that it can change its sails in a relatively short time, even at sea.”

The two of them were conversing while looking up at the ship.

“So, you can have all four sails as fore-and-aft when you have a headwind and all four as square when you have a tailwind?”

“Exactly. Of course, while it is *possible* to change the sails at sea, it still takes time and effort and is rather dangerous. So unless we are absolutely certain the

wind direction will not change, we keep the paired configuration.”

“I see.” It was then that he finally looked at the princess standing at his side. “I notice you are wearing the same outfit again. Is it because you are close to the ship?” he asked.

Freya was clad in the same clothes as the first day they had met. She wore men’s pants and a shirt with a large, eye-catching collar. Atop that, she had both a long jacket and a thick leather belt. The only real difference between now and the first time they had met was the short curved sword that hung from her belt.



Of course, while she was cross-dressing, her wardrobe was the only manly thing about her. None of her womanly curves were hidden, and a closer inspection even revealed that she was wearing makeup. The fact that the outfit was half-hearted was much the same as well.

Freya read between the lines and understood his question of why a woman would wear such an outfit from his expression. He hadn't gotten to ask it the last time they had spoken, but he would get his answer now as Freya answered with a laugh.

"Our country sees our ships as female," she explained. "Thus, the only people allowed to 'marry' a ship and become her captain are single men. Even married male captains have to divorce their wives in name before setting sail, and female captains like me need to wear men's clothes."

"I see. A somewhat strange custom," Zenjirou said before realizing that his words could be taken as mocking a firmly held belief as some superstition. He hurriedly added. "Not that I mean to make light of your customs, of course."

She seemed somewhat amused by his panic and chuckled slightly before answering. "You don't need to worry. I think of it as a simple superstition myself. A lot of sailors are rather superstitious, though, so these customs don't really die out."

"That makes sense. If the sailors actually believe it, then going against those customs could cause them to make mistakes they normally wouldn't due to the mental strain."

Freya gave a deep nod of agreement. "Correct. We have some rather excessive superstitions for captains too. While the sailors are off entertaining themselves in a port's red-light district the captain is all alone and should ple—"

"Your Highness?!" came a yell from the now pale-faced warrior standing behind them, as the princess was on the verge of saying something rather inappropriate for her station.

Interrupting a conversation between royals was ill-mannered even for close associates, but it would be less inappropriate than allowing her liege to finish. It was already too late, in truth, but Zenjirou was well-mannered enough to

pretend he hadn't heard anything.

Freya's own cheeks took on a rosy hue as she realized what she had been saying and cast her eyes downwards. "My apologies, Your Majesty. My time on the waves has loosened my tongue somewhat. I would appreciate you letting that pass."

Zenjirou glanced at the sailors from the *Glafir's Leaf* standing behind them and could understand why. These men were the embodiment of the phrase "ruffians of the sea." Skaji was already extremely tall for a woman, but a fair portion of the sailors were even taller. They had light-colored hair and eyes like anyone from the Northern Continent but all had tanned complexions of burnished bronze. Their hair wasn't particularly well-kept either, and they had wild beards. They had more defined features than those of this continent, and their deeply set eyes coupled with that gave them a practically menacing air. It was no surprise that a refined princess might pick up some rather coarse terms spending over 120 days on a ship with such ruffians.

Of course, I doubt she was the most reserved princess to begin with, Zenjirou thought as he recalled their lunch meeting. She had been fully involved in the negotiations. Unlike Zenjirou—who had left the preliminary work to Rafaello and simply picked his choices from a shortlist—Freya had carried out the entirety of the discussions herself. That was not the act of a princess, not even one in her twenties, he reminded himself.

It was just as those thoughts were going through his head that it happened. A clamor that almost seemed to echo within his mind sounded out across Valentia. Zenjirou didn't know the exact meaning of it, but the volume made it obvious that it was no ordinary occurrence.

"Damian! What was that?!" he asked, turning to face the governor—the most knowledgeable person when it came to the city—as the sound made him start.

The middle-aged man immediately stepped forward and answered with a somewhat pale face. "Sir, that was the bell warning us of an attack. It was the eastern bell, so there must be some incident in the direction of the mountains, not the sea."

Valentia was a port town on the western coast of Randlion. It had the sea to

its west and mountains to the east, or more accurately, an elevated forest. Thus, if the alarm was sounding from that direction, the problem must be in the mountains.

“An incident in the mountains?” Zenjirou muttered. It had come completely out of left field. However, there was nothing he could contribute to the situation, so his decision was immediate. “I will return to the residence. Damian, I leave the situation to you. Rafaello, you will be our liaison. If Damian has need of you, however, you may delay your report to me. Ensure you leave enough men to protect the duke’s home.”

Essentially, he was saying, “I’m going to hide away, you deal with it, make sure you protect me as well.”

The statement was utterly blunt, but he knew he would only get in the way if he tried to throw his weight around in a situation like this with no real experience. The most he could offer was to let everyone do their jobs.

In fact, Damian looked relieved by his decision. “Understood, sir. Excuse me,” he stated before rushing off.

“Lord Damian, I will accompany you. Excuse me, Sir Zenjirou,” Rafaello offered. Naturally, his usual soft smile had vanished, and his expression was serious as he followed the governor.

Left behind, Zenjirou watched the men for a moment before turning to the princess. “As you heard, an unforeseen situation has occurred. I will be returning to the residence. Would you accompany me?”

“Very well,” Freya answered calmly.



That evening, Zenjirou was in a room of his temporary abode as he finally received Rafaello’s report on the situation.

“My apologies for the wait, Sir Zenjirou.”

“There is no issue. I told you to prioritize the situation on the ground, after all. It seems things have calmed for the moment, though. Give your report.”

While he straightened in his chair and kept his tone as pompous as he could,

Zenjirou was already mentally at his limit. He had followed his guards' advice and remained in the innermost room of the building, but he had still managed to hear some of the conflict outside.

Shouts such as "What?!" and "Impossible?!" along with demands to "Move the wounded!" and questions like "How many have we lost?" made it obvious that there was a rather dangerous situation facing Valentia. On top of that, the soldiers had shifted from easily carried "self-defense" weaponry like their curved swords and short spears to combat gear with bows and long spears as they stood guard in the garden. To be perfectly honest, Zenjirou was just relieved that he hadn't screamed shrilly in fear.

Regardless, he waited with bated breath for Rafaello's delayed report. The fact that his usual smile had now completely vanished and the man was stone-faced made it clear how serious the situation was.

"To sum it up, this disturbance was caused by swarm raptors appearing in the farming district."

The words that left the man's lips were just as bad as Zenjirou had expected. Valentia was the largest trading port in Capua, a productive fishing port, and also a salt-producing region. All that meant that a commensurate number of people lived in the city, which in turn meant that they needed sufficient food to feed everyone. Therefore, there were a fair number of farms around the outskirts of the city.

One of those farms had been attacked by swarm raptors. Zenjirou's breath caught in his throat before he took a deeper breath to compose himself and asked a short question.

"Our losses?"

"Significant. In terms of confirmed human casualties, we have lost twenty-one people. Cattle, particularly the relatively small and easily removed meat drakes are a complete loss. The majority of the draft drakes were also killed. The district will not recover on its own."

While the human casualties were severe, a complete loss of livestock was almost worse in some respects. A village couldn't continue without its livestock. Famine and poverty would be dogging the residents' steps before long.

There were no laws that guaranteed the citizens any compensation in the case of a natural disaster. Any aid in these situations was at the regional lord's whim. In Valentia's case, that would be either its duchess, Aura, or else its governor, Damian.

Hmm, maybe I could allow it at the moment too? Zenjirou thought, remembering his current position as a proxy for the Duchess of Valentia for an instant before shaking the thought off. The situation was still developing, and it wasn't the right time to consider compensation for the victims.

"Our counteroffensive? If you have enough time to report then I assume things have calmed down for now, but it seems unlikely the situation is resolved."

Rafaello answered in the affirmative. "Indeed. Frankly, the counteroffensive was too delayed. By the time the men arrived on the scene by Lord Damian's order, the only sign of the swarm raptors was their retreating figures. The men pursued them to the tree line but were unable to engage."

In other words, the raptors had vanished into the foliage after their attack, and the situation had not been resolved.

"I see." Silence reigned as Zenjirou pondered the situation. Eventually, he asked for confirmation from the man. "Rafaello."

"Sir?"

"Have you heard about the incident on the salt road?"

"I have. Margrave Gaziel brought the situation to the table. It was initially entrusted to his son, Lord Xavier, but I had heard that General Pujol took reinforcements over. I also heard that the general judged it to be beyond his forces' capability and requested further reinforcements from Her Majesty."

It would seem that Zenjirou and Rafaello had the same amount of information, but Zenjirou pressed him further. "It appears the cause was a group of swarm raptors led by a specimen beyond even the local hunters' knowledge. Do you think the situations might be connected?"

"I think the situations are too similar to call coincidence. The incident on the salt road and the attack here were both caused by swarm raptors. Also, the

normal size of such a group would be around ten. I have heard that groups above twenty or thirty are seldom seen. Regardless, several people have testified that this attack was carried out by close to a hundred raptors.”

“A hundred?” Zenjirou echoed.

“Yes. Of course, the reports were from untrained farmers fleeing for their lives and so are not necessarily the most reliable. However, they all described the group as ‘exceedingly huge’ or ‘a hopeless number,’ so the group is certainly larger than ten or twenty.”

Getting a precise count of a group at a glance was a specialized skill. An average farmer at risk of death would not be able to manage it. That said, one or two reports would be one thing, but with the majority of the escapees claiming the same, it was natural to assume there were a large number of the creatures indeed.

“I heard the raptors on the salt road were also a rather large group. It seems more plausible that the raptors from there have moved here rather than two groups of similar size developing in two separate places,” Rafaello continued. “However, there is a considerable distance between Valentia and the salt road connecting the Gaziel March and the capital. Even a straight path would cross two or three mountains. Therefore, I would hesitate to say that one group has traveled this far.”

On the salt road, General Pujol and Xavier had already started to convey the information that the raptors there had been pushed farther into the mountains and could therefore cause large-scale territory disputes, but that information had yet to reach the capital.

Naturally, it also had yet to reach Zenjirou. Never mind the internet or phones, this world didn’t even have a public postal system.

Before the great war, Capua had had an information network via several users of teleportation magic that in some ways even surpassed modern technology. Unfortunately, the only user of that magic now was the queen herself.

“I understand. I shall send a dwarf wyvern to Her Majesty. Perhaps she has more information than we do. Even if not, she needs to be informed.”

“Please do, sir. However, we require a rapid decision. Frankly, waiting for a reply from Her Majesty is dangerous.”

The man’s unusually plain declaration was logical. The situation here would change by the moment. However wise Aura was, it would take time to get the information to the capital, so she could not give precise instructions from moment to moment.

Understanding the man’s point, Zenjirou hid his unease behind an expressionless facade and agreed. “True. It would be best to limit our exchange of information with the capital and decide ourselves. I am under the assumption that I am currently the highest political and military authority in the city. Am I mistaken?”

“No, you are not mistaken. Lord Damian would normally command the Valentian military, but you are currently here as a proxy.”

He had wanted to be mistaken, but contrary to his desires, Rafaello agreed with his statement. While Damian held the role of governor, Zenjirou was here as the queen’s proxy, which was a completely different matter. A governor had partial rights entrusted to them by the duchess, but a full proxy temporarily had—as the name implied—all the rights of the duchess.

The most obvious distinction was that if Aura in her role as duchess found fault with any of the governor’s orders, she could immediately repeal them but could not do so in the case of a proxy. This was because the appointment of a proxy meant that she temporarily lost those rights herself. Therefore, in order to halt any of her proxy’s actions, even Aura would have to go through the process of rescinding those rights.

The matter was somewhat complicated, but the chain of authority went from the Duchess of Valentia temporarily transferring all rights of the duchy to Zenjirou, and then Zenjirou assigning Damian as the region’s governor. Therefore, Damian was now his direct subordinate.

Resisting the heavy responsibility paining his stomach, Zenjirou thought, *Normally I could just call Lord Damian and tell him to deal with the problem as he saw fit. The issue is that Princess Freya’s group is also here.*

Knowledge of the situation would be with them before long, and he could

easily imagine them seeking the right to bear arms in response. Even with the lesser knowledge of drakes in the North, they would be wary when they heard about the rampage of the swarm raptors. He couldn't see them being willing to be understanding if Zenjirou said they would deal with it locally. However, given Zenjirou's position, he couldn't easily allow foreign forces to bear arms.

With Freya's recognition as legitimate royalty, her guards were allowed sufficient weaponry to protect her even now, but allowing them weaponry for *battle* was another matter entirely.

The easiest method would probably be to have them participate in the fight against the raptors. That'd give them a valid reason, at least. Sending all her guards to the front line is putting the cart before the horse, though...

Having come to an idea that seemed promising, he addressed his aide, who was waiting respectfully. "Rafaello."

"Yes, sir?"

"I assume Princess Freya has already heard about the situation. In that case, I assume that her guards will request permission to arm themselves for her protection."

"I believe so too, sir."

With that agreement, Zenjirou continued. "However, considering our position, we cannot allow foreign forces, even allied ones, to arm themselves in royal lands. We need a valid reason to allow them to do so."

"We do."

"Rafaello, truthfully, would allowing Princess Freya's guards to participate cause any issues?"

Rafaello's quick wit allowed him to divine Zenjirou's aim from that question alone. "If I may speak frankly, it would indeed cause significant problems. While the Northern Continent's warriors are certainly strong, they have very little experience in fighting against drakes on the land. Besides, even if they had such experience, their tactics would be too different. If they were to participate with different weapons, formations, and keywords, it would be easier if they were against us, I imagine." He paused and then continued with what Zenjirou

wanted to hear. “However, if we were to assign them to a single area rather than fully integrate them with our own forces, we should be able to keep any issues to a minimum. As they are unfamiliar with the area, we will assign them several guides.”

Of course, those guides would also be observers. That should keep things within expectations. Zenjirou couldn’t hide the relief from his voice, having been concerned about his hands being tied politically.

“I see. Then that sounds appropriate. Rafaello, I appreciate that this will be a burden, but inform Princess Freya of the situation. Once you have, I will request her cooperation.”

“Very well, I shall do as you command,” the aide answered respectfully with a bow of his head.



Later that night, Zenjirou was once more in the room where he had spoken with Rafaello that evening, but this time with Freya. The space was furnished with several silver candlesticks for entertaining nobles at night, and the candles within them flickered.

It had been over a month since his arrival in Valentia, and Zenjirou was fairly used to life away from his electricity in the inner palace. It was the first “bright night” he’d had in a while. While he had the hand-cranked lamp, it was—for all of its brightness—a very directional light. The white glow was perfect to illuminate his way but unsuitable for lighting an entire room.

Conversely, while the light from the candlesticks was insufficient, there were several arrayed around them, which lit the entire room dimly.

Zenjirou sat in that dim light and looked steadily at the blue-dress-clad girl before beginning to speak. “I assume you are already aware of the details from Rafaello, but there has been a somewhat unexpected development in Valentia.”

“I have,” she answered easily. “He explained that several midsize drakes called swarm raptors attacked.”

The princess showed no loss of composure and maintained a soft expression. It was almost a little disconcerting for the girl to be so at ease despite being in a

foreign country with alarm bells ringing, requiring her to take refuge with no idea of what was going on.

Then again, it made some sense when one considered that she had set out on an unknown journey with no guarantee of survival. She was made of sterner stuff than most girls.

“Swarm raptors do not exist on the Northern Continent, do they?” Zenjirou asked, adding some idle chatter to keep the conversation moving.

The blue-silver-haired girl shook her head. “They do not. We have very few land-bound drakes on the continent, but those we do have are only the larger varieties. Not to mention they live in the heights of mountains, so very few of our citizens would ever see one.”

There was also the fact that the church revering ancient wyrms had designated those areas as “holy ground,” and it was all the more difficult for people to set foot in them. Freya naturally had no inclination to speak of such intricacies in this situation and kept her reply relatively inoffensive.

“That makes sense. Regardless, the current situation means that Valentia will be under martial law for the time being. It may lead to some discomfort on your part, but we would appreciate your cooperation.”

Freya was not foolish enough to act selfishly in this situation when she had already heard the details from Rafaello. “Very well. If there is anything that we can do to help solve this situation, please inform us. While we cannot offer a great deal, we will cooperate,” she offered, moving so fluidly into her response that it could only imply it had been preprepared.

Zenjirou also answered somewhat purposefully. “That would be appreciated. Gaining the aid of your brave warriors from across the waves would put my heart greatly at ease. Could I accept your offer and borrow several of your men? It pains me to admit it, but we can use all possible help to support the front line.”

“That is no issue. However, they are not tireless warriors from legend. I would prefer to split them in half and alternate the groups if you would be willing?”

“Of course. I can only praise your wise decision,” Zenjirou answered.

Both prince consort and princess smiled happily at each other upon forming this agreement. These were the conditions he had proposed via Rafaello, and Freya had accepted them.

Half of Freya’s guard would be sent to the front line, while the remaining half would stay behind for her protection. But as they would also form a relief troop for the front lines, they would be armed for combat during guard duty.

Naturally, it was important for the foreign side of things that even her guards be allowed to be heavily armed to act as relief. On the local front, with the numbers being halved, even if her guards were heavily armed, the Capuan soldiers remaining at the residence would be able to take them down if it came to it, so Zenjirou’s safety was assured. With them acting as relief to fight against the swarm raptors, even though their countries were not allied, it formed an excuse to allow her men to remain heavily armed.

Practically speaking, it was actually helpful for her to offer her soldiers as aid as well. The village that had been destroyed wasn’t the only one outside the city’s walls. Zenjirou had been telling the truth when he said that every soldier would be helpful.

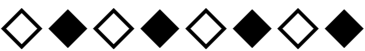
With the discussion concluded, Freya looked towards the warrior standing behind her and issued her instructions. “You heard him, Skaji. Separate our men into two units. You will lead one while someone of your choice will lead the other.”

The statement seemed to be a surprise to the tall warrior. She blinked before saying, “Your Highness, I—”

But Freya refused to let her speak and bluntly spoke over her. “It will be fine. I will stay safely here, so go to the front line and display your skill.”

Her tone made it clear that there would be no rescission of her statement.

“Very well,” the warrior answered eventually, expressionless as she accepted the order.



Regardless of Skaji’s agreement, Freya’s guard would be working on a two-shift system. The two of them were now in a room in the duke’s residence, and

Skaji would be guarding her overnight, with her favored spear's butt resting on the floor.

Freya was sitting on the bed, wearing a relatively light dress that wouldn't impede her, while Skaji remained in her leathers with her carved tusk spear ready as she sat on the sofa with one knee raised. They were both wearing clothing that would allow them to go outside in the event of an emergency and would likely continue doing so even through their sleep until the crisis was resolved.

They would ordinarily have long since gone to sleep, but the oil lamp on the table still cast its red glow across the room. The princess's hair took on a slight reddish tinge in the light. She was only wearing a single layer of clothing in the form of her dress, and as she heaved a sigh on the bed, it was an almost fairy tale-like scene.

However, the words coming from the object of said fairy tale were all too real. "Skaji, if your group does well against these raptors, how much will we be able to leverage it, do you think?"

She would have to admit that she was perhaps counting her chickens before they hatched, but with her position, her thoughts were always focused on the future. If a person only started thinking about how to use their leverage once they had it, they could lose their chance to apply it.

The warrior pulled her favored spear in towards her chest as she answered. "Well, this is purely hypothetical, but if we were to kill the swarm's boss, I assume you would be able to request that the negotiations advance a little further," was her calm reply.

"Advance further, so that I may be able to bring them to the capital?" Freya verified.

"Yes," Skaji answered curtly.

Freya's negotiations thus far had been with Zenjirou—or rather through him to Aura, as she supported him—and would be completed in Valentia in order to allow the royal family to gain the most from the exchange.

Naturally, Freya understood Aura's position as a fellow royal and would likely

have made the same decision if she was in the same position. However, from her current position, she would rather negotiate with the nobility of the country as a whole rather than just the royal family. Multiple suppliers would lead to them competing for lower prices, but it also might lead to the availability of goods the royal family found difficult to obtain via the feudal lords. In that respect, it would be preferable to speak directly with those lords rather than negotiating through the royal family.

“Well, establishing trade is our main concern at present. If we’re too greedy, we could make it more difficult and come out with nothing.”

“True. His Majesty seems to be open-minded and willing to repay kindness with kindness. We should avoid garnering his displeasure,” Skaji agreed.

The Northern princess’s eyes widened in surprise somewhat at her confidant’s new view of Zenjirou. “Oh? That’s a rather significant change of tune? Have you reevaluated him?”

The warrior gave no sign of annoyance at her liege’s almost teasing tone as she nodded. “I have. Judging from his conversations with you and his interactions, he certainly seems able to think for himself. Therefore, I think it would be better to stay on his good side.”

Her opinion had been cemented by his reaction to the swarm raptors. How he had dealt with the emergency bell and his later meeting with Freya established that. Zenjirou had certainly delegated the tasks themselves but had unquestionably been the first to speak and give orders when the bell sounded.

A true figurehead with no decision-making power of his own would have waited for someone to say “Sir Zenjirou, it is dangerous here; please return to the residence,” and simply replied in the affirmative. However, he had taken the initiative and left the issue to Damian while actively deciding to return to the estate.

By itself, that demonstrated that he was well aware of his own position and was *intentionally* acting as a figurehead to avoid causing as much trouble as he could.

Unlike the warrior, Freya had not judged him that harshly to begin with and now nodded in satisfaction. “Agreed. It is fortunate that we have someone so

sincere and relatable as the leader of our negotiations. I think it would be best to proceed conservatively until we conclude.”

Zenjirou’s only consideration was to fulfill his role without causing problems. He had no intention to act carelessly and betray Aura’s expectations or to gain fame and worsen relations with his wife. Because of these desires, he was a better negotiation partner for Freya as well. Freya herself saw her position as a weak one. If the fancy took them, Capua could forcefully take the broken *Glasiir’s Leaf* and her freedom. Compared to the worst case, returning with even this modest trade was preferable.

“Indeed. Rest, for now, Your Highness. I will protect you from whatever may disturb you, be that a Southern drake, or some foreign soldier,” Skaji vowed quietly, spear in hand.

The princess smiled softly back and obediently lay down on the bed. “Thank you, Skaji. I trust you.”

In keeping with her statement, it was very little time before the princess was sleeping, defenseless.

Chapter 5 — A Predicament Born from Kindness

Three days later, Zenjirou found himself looking down on a slight youth kneeling before him. As he did, he was devoting all his focus to his expression, making sure that his internal unease didn't show on his face.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Sir Zenjirou. I am the third son of Margrave Gaziel, Xavier. I am honored to be given the chance to meet you personally."

The youth—Xavier—spoke clearly yet somewhat awkwardly. For his part, Zenjirou remained seated as he looked down at him and replied.

"I am the husband of Her Majesty Queen Aura I, Zenjirou. Raise your head."

"Sir!"

Xavier's gaze almost seemed to gleam as he looked into Zenjirou's eyes. Zenjirou felt an urge to rear back but managed to suppress it.

How can I put this? He's pretty much a straightforward youth, the likes of which I haven't seen in some time.

The first impression the boy gave was exceedingly positive. Zenjirou, however, couldn't relax enough to let that show.

Xavier Gaziel was the promised heir to the Gaziel March. He was also the person to initially undertake the solving of the salt road problem. Zenjirou knew enough to infer the reason Aura had sent him and the bearded hunter at his side to Valentia with her teleportation magic. Thus, his heart was currently racing like he had finished an all-out sprint.

If his assumptions were correct, the youth had been sent to him to deliver an awfully bothersome message.

Unfortunately, it wasn't as if he could ignore it.

"So, Her Majesty sent you both to this region?"

On the surface, Zenjirou was being short with him, but internally he was

hesitant to ask the question. Regardless, Xavier pulled a letter from his pocket with brisk movements. It went without saying that the wax seal on it had the crest of the Capuan royal family pressed into it.

“Please read this,” Xavier said before offering the letter respectfully with both hands.

At a meaningful look from Zenjirou, Ines stepped forward and took it, opening it in front of Zenjirou after carrying out the formality of checking for deception.

“Very well,” Zenjirou said.

Ordinarily, the sheet of drake parchment would have been handed to him, and Zenjirou would have read it over. Unfortunately, his linguistic abilities weren’t yet at the level where he could read and comprehend it unaided. While it was somewhat embarrassing, Ines held it out in front of him and read through it aloud, her right index finger following the words as she did, like a mother reading a picture book to her child.

“I recommend that the person before you, Xavier Gaziel, be given responsibility for the current swarm raptor subjugation. I place him under command of the current full proxy of the Duchess of Valentia, Zenjirou Capua, to fulfill this role.”

Beneath it was Aura’s signature in her familiar handwriting.

I knew it.

Despair and displeasure assailed him as Zenjirou’s premonition was confirmed. Regardless, he knew that showing such dismay now would end badly and so feigned calm as he answered.

“I see. I understand the situation. However, I have already deployed the duchy’s forces to protect the surrounding settlements. The important men will be gathered tomorrow, so I shall have you discuss the specifics then, no?”

“Yes, sir!” Xavier answered energetically and clearly, oblivious to Zenjirou’s concerns.



“Damn, damn, damn, damn it all! What do I do?”

When he returned to his room, Zenjirou kicked out even Ines, his most trusted maid, and found himself alone as he broke into a cold sweat.

The issue he was worried about was, of course, Xavier Gaziel's arrival via teleportation. The arrival in and of itself was a blessing. Xavier had already encountered the swarm raptors several times on the salt road, so he would be able to confirm whether it was the same group. In addition, the "bearded man" who had arrived with him was primarily a hunter—someone Zenjirou had lacked until now. The man's knowledge of drakes and his observations would doubtless be a great boon to the subjugation process. Zenjirou could see why Aura had used her precious reserves to cast teleportation twice in the same day. However, her consideration put Zenjirou in a rather thorny situation, politically speaking.

"I already sent out subjugation squads. I even put Rafaello in charge. Now Aura's interfering from afar. This is gonna be bad."

The squads had not yet been organized when Zenjirou had sent the dwarf wyvern to the capital. As a result, it was to be expected that she would have no knowledge of his actions on that front, but it still put him in a tricky position.

"I suppose she said that she was *recommending* him, so maybe I can ignore it? Nah, no way. It'd be a disaster for the prince consort to ignore a direct recommendation from the queen," he muttered.

But what of taking her suggestion and placing Xavier in charge? That would be even worse. Zenjirou's current title was "the full proxy of the Duchess of Valentia." The moment she had appointed him to the role, Aura had temporarily surrendered the rights the position afforded her, hence the "full" in the title. Therefore, it was effectively the queen interfering with the personal domain of the current duke (or full proxy thereof) of Valentia, Zenjirou. It was a contravention of the accepted rights to independence that the feudal lords of the country held.

"Argh, didn't she notice? I mean, I guess not. She probably took the wyvern as seeking instruction rather than an exchange of information."

The capital was too far from Valentia, even with the wyverns and teleportation, and an information exchange took three days. Relying on

instructions from someone three or four days away would be a great detriment to the local situation. Therefore, the dwarf wyvern Zenjirou had sent was not meant for anything more than informing her of the situation, but Aura seemed to have taken it as him awaiting instruction.

Coincidentally, General Pujol’s concern about the lack of detailed information in the missive causing inconsistencies had come to pass, but here in Valentia instead.

Who was at fault? Was it Zenjirou, who hadn’t explicitly stated that the letter was merely meant to provide information rather than ask for guidance? Or was it Aura for deciding that her husband was waiting for guidance on everything as he usually did?

Perhaps it was Zenjirou’s fault, but for forgetting his usual attitude of acting as incapable as possible due to the shock of the loss of life, which had spurred him to immediately take action?

“Yeah,” he decided eventually, “it mostly falls on me.”

He had the tendency to place responsibility on himself, so that was the eventual conclusion he came to with a slump of his shoulders. With things as they stood, he was greatly thankful for the presence of Xavier and the young man’s bearded subordinate in the subjugation of the raptors.

He could also understand Aura’s aim. The initial situation had been given to Xavier in order to cement his position as the next margrave by the current margrave. Aura had probably been impressed enough with Xavier to aid him in that. Xavier had, in effect, been sent here as a kindness to both Zenjirou and to Xavier himself. The decision had been made with the best of intentions for everyone involved. However, those good intentions had now placed Zenjirou in a difficult position.

“Well, there’s no choice. It’s going to end up pretty hectic, but I’ll just have to try to balance things out,” he decided, coming to the conclusion that there was no way he would manage to cancel out all the political consequences.



Early the next morning, the heads of the troops dealing with the swarm raptor

subjugation were arrayed around a large table in the duke's reception room. Zenjirou was seated at what would, on Earth, be called the head of the table as he looked at the assembly's faces and spoke bluntly.

"First, the report. Rafaello."

The first name to pass his lips was the man *currently* in charge of the subjugation—Rafaello Márquez. So called on, Rafaello stood from his seat and delivered his report.

"Yes, sir. Since yesterday evening, six units have been seeing to the defense of the settlements in the area. Five are from the Valentian Duchy's army, while the last is made up of loaned manpower from Princess Freya's guard. Fortunately, there were no further attacks last night."

Zenjirou breathed a sigh of relief at that. This was the fourth day after the initial assault, and the raptors had already attacked a second time two days prior. They had been ready for it, though, and had managed to intercept the creatures, succeeding in taking several of them down and keeping human casualties to zero.

However, it didn't change the fact that the village had been attacked and casualties, particularly in the form of livestock—meat drakes in particular—had increased dramatically. If the current trend continued, the villages around the town that supplied Valentia with both meat and grain would be finished.

Zenjirou's expression tensed as he spoke. "Good work. Yet, as long as the raptors remain, the situation will not change for the better, even if we did have the fortune to avoid an attack last night. The main question is how we eliminate this swarm while protecting the villages from the threat they represent."

The statement was practically unnecessary at this point, but the men at the table all nodded gravely. Taking their reactions into account, he decided to introduce the two men standing behind him.

"To that end, we require detailed information on these beasts. Fortunately, Her Majesty has sent capable reinforcements due to her concern about my lack of knowledge of this area. I introduce Lord Xavier Gaziel."

At those words, the slight youth took a step forward, his cheeks flushed with

nerves as he spoke loudly. “M-My thanks for your introduction. I am Xavier Gaziel! I was involved with the subjugation of swarm raptors on the salt road. Despite my youth, I will be immensely happy if my experience is of any use to you!”

Xavier was a high-ranking noble and was set to inherit the Gaziel March. Therefore, the only person who ranked higher than him socially was Zenjirou, the prince consort. However, the boy was still young and had only rarely left the march before now, so it would be pointless to tell him to not be nervous.

From that perspective, however, the bearded hunter at his side had it worse.

“The man next to him is Antonio, a skilled hunter of the Gaziel March. There is no one in the region more knowledgeable about drake ecology than he. Therefore, he has been invited here as a special adviser.”

“M-M-My name is Antonio! I-I hope to be of use!”

It was perhaps worthy of mention that the hunter managed to finish introducing himself even as he looked like he was about to faint. The man was middle-aged and had been called to stand among over ten nobles—including royalty. It would normally be considered more of a curse than an honor.

“Lord Xavier encountered swarm raptors on several occasions on the salt road, while it goes without saying that Antonio is a specialist. I would like to start by hearing from them.”

There was no disagreement with Zenjirou’s suggestion. A while later, he discovered another of Raffaello Márquez’s strong points.

“I see,” Raffaello replied to Xavier. “So, we are certain the swarm raptors are those that escaped from the salt road?”

“Yes, Lord Raffaello,” came the prompt reply, Xavier growing more confident, his nerves having vanished. “We circled their den from the east. If they escaped afterwards, it would have been to the west. Valentia is to the west of the salt road, so it makes sense.”

“I see. Antonio. Would you say it is possible that the raptors crossed the two or three mountains between here and there?”

“Y-Yes. I do think so. No other creature can boast the same speed through dense foliage. However, as we said earlier, if they are indeed the same raptors, it implies they suffered a string of defeats in territory disputes throughout those woods. I am not sure we could state with any certainty that they would remain a full swarm with that many losses in such a short time frame...”

For his part, the bearded hunter remained nervous, but he could at least provide his opinion without issue now. Raffaello Márquez was an exceptional listener. Regardless of their visitors’ initial reservations, Raffaello’s calm tone and expression remained constant throughout the discussion, which helped both Xavier and the bearded hunter to pull themselves together.

Thanks to that, the group was able to compare information on the swarm raptors that had attacked the salt road and those currently attacking Valentia.

“With everything taken into account, we can most likely assume that the swarm raptors currently attacking the area are the same as those from the salt road,” Raffaello concluded.

“Your reasoning?” Zenjirou asked bluntly.

“Well, the primary reason is that the initial attack site showed bloodstains from the raptors. During that first raid, the troops didn’t make it in time to stop them, so there was a question of who actually wounded them, but if they are the same group that escaped from the salt road, the explanation is clear.”

Swarm raptors had the same red blood as humans, but it was highly viscous and therefore easily distinguishable in bright light. However, Raffaello’s explanation actually increased Zenjirou’s doubts.

“Hm? So the raptors took wounds on the salt road and crossed the mountains all this way while they were still bleeding? Would they not have either bled out or healed along the way?”

A rebuttal came from the bearded hunter. “I-It is most likely because they still had the arrows or spears embedded in them. They heal exceedingly quickly, so the wounds will close before long even with that. However, because the arrowheads remain, they will tear the skin each time the creatures move vigorously, causing them to bleed a little bit at a time.”

“I see,” Zenjirou answered, convinced by the simple explanation. But he still had another query. “However, working off that assumption, it bothers me that we have had no reports of the huge raptor in either of the two attacks carried out so far. No one was present the first time around, but our men fought them during the second attack. Is it possible that their leader already died?”

Xavier fielded that question. “Ah, no. It never once appeared close enough to engage. The creature only ever remained in the foliage and gave orders to attack or retreat while it lurked cautiously.”

“There were soldiers who said they heard a deafening roar from the trees,” Rafaello added. “They also stated that the raptors immediately began to retreat following that roar.”

“Hmm...” Zenjirou frowned instinctively at the plausible explanation. If these assumptions and the information were all correct, the huge raptor was not only big, strong, and intelligent, it was also cautious. There was no type of creature that would be harder to deal with.

“If we could at least keep them in one place, things would be easier,” one of the commanding officers griped.

Zenjirou could sympathize. In truth, while the swarm raptors were beyond the abilities of unarmed civilians or the few guards of a merchant, they were not unmanageable for a well-trained unit. The issue was that the creatures fled so readily.

“Would a pitfall trap work?” someone asked.

“Swarm raptors are capable of jumping up to their own height with no running start. Unless they were deep enough, it would not work,” the hunter replied.

“Perhaps something like birdlime?”

“They have extremely strong legs, so they would normally just power through it. They have a good sense of smell as well, so they may well not even get caught by it.”

“Damn, how can they move around so well? They only just arrived from the salt road. Surely they need to get the lay of the land first. Wild animals have it

too good.”

As he listened to the kvetching commander, the bearded hunter gave a rueful smile and answered faithfully. “It’s due to the scent. They mark places periodically with urine and by rubbing themselves on tree trunks to leave their scent behind to act as guideposts.”

“The scent?” Zenjirou asked, joining the conversation once more from where he had been listening as the word stirred a memory. “What would the raptors do if we could remove that scent?”

The hunter, despite his bewilderment at the sudden question from the prince consort, answered honestly. “I-I am not entirely certain. I imagine they would mill around at a loss for a while. But that is impossible, Sir Zenjirou. They have a rather strong scent. They also have a superlative sense of smell, so we would be unable to get rid of their scent without a great deal of effort.” Understanding Zenjirou’s aim, the hunter was rather apologetic as he spoke, but even so, the look on Zenjirou’s face didn’t change.

“You have some precedent for that judgment, though, no? How did that happen?”

“Through a landslide. It was during the height of the rainy season, and the trees themselves were swept away. Without their signs, the swarm raptors ended up somewhere completely different.”

That made it obvious to Zenjirou that it would be by no means simple—a man-made landslide would be quite difficult to cause.

“Hmm...” Regardless, he still hadn’t given up on the idea. He surveyed everyone at the table and spoke again. “If we could do so, could we beat them?”

Rafaello was the first to respond. “If Antonio is correct and we can intentionally remove those scents before an attack, we should be able to corral the raptors to a degree.”

“Indeed,” Xavier added, putting his thoughts into words as they occurred to him. “If we were to lead a detached company and accomplish such a task, removing the scent they use to retreat, we may be able to keep them in place.”

The pair's statements seemed to draw the commanders into the conversation.

"I see. The main problem is how to stop their escape, so if we could just slow them down a little..."

"But it will be too late if they take refuge in the trees. We can't use dash drakes then. We might be able to guide the raptors somewhat, but pursuit will be difficult."

"The problem is the leader. If we can take him down, it will be a blow to the rest. They won't be able to stay organized when there are over a hundred of them," one commander declared with a confident expression.

They had been unable to get an accurate count of the beasts during the first attack, but they had managed to engage during the second, and the soldiers had provided rough estimates of the numbers involved. Considering swarm raptor packs normally had only around ten or so members, gathering a hundred of them together was practically a disaster.

"Over a hundred? Are you certain?" Xavier asked in shock.

"Y-Yes, we are. Is there a problem?"

It was here that Xavier realized he had failed to share a vital piece of information. The information regarding the situation on the salt road had reached the Valentians via Zenjirou and Rafaello, both of whom were aware that a large group of swarm raptors had attacked the salt road but neither of whom had the finer details. It was hardly surprising, as when they had been sent here, no one would have imagined that the problem would ever spread so far.

Xavier knew that it was his role to make them aware of the circumstances and took the utmost care so there were no inconsistencies as he shared his knowledge. "Each attack on the salt road was carried out by approximately fifty swarm raptors. Each time they attacked, we whittled their numbers down, but the next attack would always be carried out by just as many. General Pujol was of the opinion that they had split their forces and had a reserve to replenish their lost fighters."

That opinion had been proven to be fact. While their hunt through the mountains with the reinforcements hadn't encountered the main force, the traces (feces, claw marks, and similar) had been far more than a group of around fifty would leave. The bearded hunter had estimated their numbers at "at least two hundred, possibly even more than five hundred." Yet despite that, there were more than a hundred of them now attacking Valentia.

"What does that mean? Did they attack with a larger force because they were fighting over a larger area?"

If the swarm raptors were taking into account the scope of the battlefield to make decisions about how much of their forces to use, that would be a nightmare. Considering how the huge raptor had acted thus far, it was a terrifyingly plausible suggestion.

However, the hunter was the most knowledgeable about the mountains and had a completely different opinion after some thought. "No. I believe it may mean they are close to their limits."

"Close to their limits?"

"What do you mean?"

Everyone present grew excited at the almost optimistic statement. The high-ranking nobles and company commanders were all far above the hunter, but despite his faltering, he managed to voice his thoughts.

"W-Well, it may be that the hundred raptors attacking are the last of them. It was bothering me the whole time. They fled from us humans, but after crossing the mountains like this, they attacked another human settlement. It is somewhat odd that they would flee our kind only to attack another 'nest' of humanity."

The commanders all exchanged glances. He was right, the raptors had fled the human soldiers across the mountains. Immediately attacking another settlement on the opposite side was somewhat strange. Xavier and the other men's gazes all converged on Antonio. The hunter's face remained nervous as he continued his explanation.

"The forest has rules of its own. Powerful drakes each have their own

territory, and weaker specimens must live in the gaps between those regions. Swarm raptors live in packs, though, so they absolutely require larger ranges. When you then take into account the hundred or more raptors that made up the giant raptor's force, their fleeing into the forest would inevitably cause territorial disputes. Those disputes result in the winner taking the territory and the loser fleeing to find somewhere else. I wonder if perhaps these raptors lost several times and therefore came all this way."

"So you mean there are drakes in those trees that can repeatedly take on two to three hundred of those swarm raptors?" Zenjirou asked, his gaze moving in that direction from where he sat. Of course, this was the duke's conference room, and all he could see were long-standing stone walls. However, he could easily imagine some great lizardly beast tearing its way through those walls.

It seemed that even Rafaello and the others, despite having been raised here, had the same feeling to an extent, and a bleak silence reigned for a time. Still, they didn't have to worry about whatever monstrous creatures might be living in those trees right now. They had to focus on the much more pressing matter.

The first to pull himself together was Rafaello, and he decided to get the conversation back on track by addressing the hunter.

"In other words, Antonio, you are saying that the swarm raptors attacking Valentia are their survivors?"

The bearded man gathered himself as well, at that, and nodded confidently. "Yes. The repeated losses in territorial disputes will have thinned their numbers each time, I believe. At the very least, they will have certainly fought since entering the trees, and their presence here is almost certainly due to repeated losses. That would inevitably lead to a reduction in numbers."

The convenience of it made it rather difficult to accept at face value, but it was at least plausible. It was difficult to imagine the drakes in the forest allowing hundreds of swarm raptors to pass unscathed. Besides, they had fled across several mountains all covered in forest. Smaller specimens with less stamina or strength would potentially have been abandoned.

As those opinions were being voiced, Xavier remembered he still had more information he hadn't yet shared. "Now that I consider it, the groups of fifty

swarm raptors that attacked us on the salt road had no females among them. That was proof of them allotting forces for offense, but what about here? Were there any females among the hundred?”

One of the commanders raised a hand at the young man’s question. “There were. We took down several raptors in the second attack, and one of them was definitely female.”

It was strong evidence in favor of the hunter’s theory.

“Then it would seem we have our conclusion,” Rafaello said with a nod.

“That explains their unusual aggression too. It was less aggression and more just them starving.”

If their traversal of the forest was a series of losses, then they would have been fighting constantly and also been unable to gather much food. That would explain why the thus-far cautious beast commanding them would take the risk of attacking a human settlement. It was a simple matter of preferring the risk rather than starving in silence.

The idea that the formidable foe laying waste to their agricultural villages was simply a group starving from repeated losses was a little saddening, but it was without a doubt a welcome fact. If they could kill the hundred raptors threatening them, the problem would be solved.

“Right. We have finished that discussion,” Zenjirou announced. “Now, gentleman, we must decide how to defeat this last group.”

With his statement as a starting point, the men began to flesh out a basic strategy.

Chapter 6 — Final Steps Towards Subjugation

The following day saw a third attack from the raptors. The first had caught them unaware, and they had lost a village, then had barely managed to pull off a counterattack during the second assault.

Now, as the third attack began, the men took the lessons they had learned to successfully destroy even more of the raptors, ultimately repelling the swarm.

The greatest success was that Xavier and the hunter were present and able to confirm that the raptors were the same as those they had faced on the salt road. The bearded hunter's reasoning was that "there were several with identical markings and coloration"—something only an expert would see—while Xavier's reasoning was simpler: the arrows sticking out of the creatures' backs were clearly, upon removal, those from a wyvern bow. They had much greater force and range than a standard bow and arrow, and the arrows themselves pierced much deeper. There was not a single soldier in the duchy who used a wyvern bow. In other words, the arrows had been fired by General Pujol's Drake Marksmen Knights. It was proof that the raptors were the same as those that had attacked the salt road.

Moreover, the hunter had confirmed that close to half of the attacking raptors were female. It would seem that all of their assumptions were correct. In that case, all they had to do now was follow the plan. The Valentian army, with Zenjirou at its head, had moved towards their endgame to ensure that the fourth attack was also the last.

The forest lay to the east of Valentia. Xavier Gaziel had been given command of a unit by Zenjirou—the commander in chief—and was faithfully carrying out his assigned mission.

"Keep your weapons sheathed until I give the order. We need to ensure we leave as little metal scent among the trees as possible."

His expression was more tense and eager than it would normally be, as he hadn't met these men until the day before and was used to working with his

own, more familiar, men.

“Yes sir!”

“Understood.”

But in spite of their commander’s youth and relative lack of experience, his efforts had gained their respect, and the soldiers dutifully followed his orders.

Xavier’s impression of the men was that they were about as well trained as his own army, which he had led from the Gaziel March. In other words, they were neither exceptional nor particularly bad. Of course, even if the soldiers had the same abilities, there was practically no trust built up between them, so lacking the same sense of them as with his own army was a painful lesson.

Still, Her Majesty said she was recommending that I be given command, but... Xavier thought to himself as he watched the soldiers investigate each tree in the dark forest. His current role was as a direct subordinate to Zenjirou, the commander in chief of the Valentian forces. During this subjugation, all of the units were under Xavier’s command but one, so he couldn’t deny that he had essentially been given command.

However, while the rank was only a formality, Zenjirou was still commander in chief and had Rafaello as a “staff officer” at his side. The forces that Rafaello led were only the single unit dedicated to guarding Zenjirou, but he held the same rank as Xavier. Also, while they were few in number, there was a unit from the Northern Continent participating, and Xavier was not commanding them either.

Will I have a place in the actual battle? he wondered uneasily to himself. It was no surprise that he was concerned.

Despite that, pessimism here wouldn’t help the situation. He shook his head and focused on the job in front of him. As he did, the familiar voice of the bearded hunter entered his ear.

“Sir Xavier, they’re here! The trees in this area most definitely have the swarm raptors’ guidance markings.”

“They do? Then we proceed as planned!”

“Sir!”

At his order, two of the soldiers took a large wooden barrel to the trees indicated by the hunter.

“Right, down it goes... Now!”

The soldiers lowered the barrel into the undergrowth and wiped the sweat from their brows. Then, they immediately followed up by opening the lid and plunging a long wooden ladle into the contents: a fine white powder.



“Spread it evenly around this tree.”

“Here we go.”

“You’ll regret it if you get it in your eyes, so fall back and wash them out if you think that’s happened!”

“Understood!”

“Let’s go!”

The men had towels around their mouths as they spread the white powder around the tree the hunter had specified.

The dark brown trunk and deep green undergrowth were soon covered in white.

“Is this really going to fool the raptors’ noses?”

“Who knows? But we may as well try.”

“Guess so. Either way, we just do what we’re told.”

The powder the soldiers were spreading somewhat dubiously was, in fact, slaked lime. When he had found out that much of Valentian cuisine involved shellfish, Zenjirou had it made as a gift for Aura as she focused on glass manufacturing by baking it at a high temperature and then grinding it with a mortar. Lime made this way—quicklime—was a hazardous substance. It reacted with water rapidly to produce a temperature change of several hundred degrees. Allowing it to react with water stabilized it into slaked lime.

Slaked lime was used fairly commonly even in modern Japan as a deodorizer. It worked without any especially harsh impact on the human body or the soil, so people who kept pets in their garden used it on their pets’ excretions out of consideration for their neighbors.

That said, this particular example had been made under Zenjirou’s direction, and he was a complete amateur, so had they truly succeeded in creating slaked lime? They had tried to seal it in the barrel to preserve it, but had it continued reacting to form calcium carbonate? Would slaked lime, even though it effaced the scent of cat and dog excretions, have the same effect on that of the swarm raptors? Even if it did, would the deodorizer be enough to fool them, given the

hunter's statement that they had such a strong sense of smell?

There were multiple problems, but the men, unfortunately, had no other ideas for how to manipulate the drakes' movements. Therefore, they had nothing to lose by trying it.

"Will this really let us direct the swarm raptors?" Xavier asked once his commands had been given, speaking to the hunter, even if it was somewhat late.

The older man scratched at his thickly bearded cheek. "I wonder myself. If this deodorizer works as Sir Zenjirou says, I think it's possible. We'll need to find the same kind of trees and rub their hides against them and spread their urine around. Yeah, it seems plausible, at least."

The drake hides had been gathered by skinning the raptors they had taken down in the third attack, and they had also extracted urine from the creatures' bladders. If they used those items on other trees, they could deceive the raptors and guide them towards a prepared battlefield. That was the foundation of their strategy.

The suggestion to use the raptors' skins and bladders had come from Zenjirou as well. He remembered seeing a TV show where they had done the same with a bear to make wild monkeys and boars believe the area was a bear's territory, to defend against attacks from them.

In any case, if they could direct the raptors to a prepared battlefield, there was a much greater chance they could actually exterminate them rather than merely repel them.

"We'll settle this next time," Xavier muttered to himself.

There was, of course, a desire to finish it by his own hand lurking beneath his conviction. It would cement his position as heir to the Gaziel March. However it had happened, this was prey that had slipped through the fingers of *the* General Pujol. If Xavier could deal with it, even a simple drake extermination was well worth accolades. However, he still felt a simple responsibility to carry out the duty he had been given as well as to alleviate the suffering that the raptors were causing to the region.

“We can’t draw it out any longer.”

Xavier’s small frame shook with both his sense of duty and will to fight.



Meanwhile, work was proceeding apace to turn the chosen farming village into a battlefield. The village was alongside a river and was relatively large. It had been chosen first because it was the farthest village from the trees. Secondly, the area was generally lowland, with small hills to the north and south of the village. Lastly, the village was a relatively new one.

The first reason was due to the difficulty the large raptor would have in ordering a retreat from the trees. Even the cautious beast might show itself here. If it decided not to leave the trees then things would be slightly more difficult, but they had measures in place for that as well.

The importance of the village being a lowland with a hill to both the north and south was simple. They could leave the meat drakes and other livestock behind and deploy the soldiers to the hills. Doing so made the village a rather convenient trap.

The third point was linked to the second. Turning the village into a trap meant that its entire population would need to at least temporarily be evacuated to safety behind the walls of Valentia.

The village’s recent creation meant that when the oldest residents had been young, they would have lived in Valentia. They would instruct the rest on how to live within the city, even if the officials did not, which would, in turn, lead to fewer problems with harboring the refugees.

“Sir Rafaello! The defensive stake wall has been completed at the village’s entrance!”

“The ambush burrows on the southern hill are complete!”

“Likewise to the north!”

“Very well,” Rafaello Márquez stated, moving to give orders with his usual calm smile. “Once your duties are finished, escort the villagers to Valentia. Do not let your guard down until this is over.”

“Yes, sir!”

Naturally, the number of soldiers would have been insufficient for the task, so they had recruited villagers, particularly the younger men. They would be paid for their labor. The livestock they were using as bait would be paid for, as would the village itself. The expenses for this operation were all from Zenjirou, from the money Aura had given him to buy whatever he fancied.

Fortunately, Freya had decided to give him the goats he wanted for free, so he had retained the entirety of that allowance. As a result, he had managed to keep everything under budget, but the money for their living expenses within the city would also have to come from him.

If their operation was prolonged, the money would run out. Of course, there was still some slack in the Valentian treasury, which was said to be even greater than the capital's. Zenjirou very much wanted to finish this without using money that Aura had not permitted him to use, though.

Rafaello had the most accurate understanding of the prince consort's concerns. “He is exactly as my stepmother said,” Rafaello mused as he looked at the distant city walls now that his orders had been given and he had a moment to himself.

Rafaello Márquez's stepmother was Lady Octavia, Zenjirou's tutor. Rafaello had heard a fair amount about the man through that connection, but now that they had met, he was once more certain of his stepmother's observations. Her evaluation had been, “He is wildly intelligent and logical, with decisiveness to spare. Above all else, he has a sincere affection for and loyalty to Her Majesty.”

She certainly had a tendency to exaggerate any praise she gave, but if he ignored the “wildly” then his short association with the man had shown that Zenjirou did indeed possess sufficient intelligence, logic, and decisiveness. The fact that never since his arrival had he acted with initiative was because he knew that careless proactive behavior could potentially hinder the queen. Going out of his way to make things easier for her while also earning the stigma of incompetence and apathy showed that his loyalty to her was significantly more than average.

“I can only imagine how much he must dislike the current situation, then.”

Rafaello could understand Zenjirou's suffering over taking on the role of commander in chief, even if it was in name only, to deal with the subjugation of these swarm raptors. The current command structure was clearly at odds with his goal of showing himself as little as possible and avoiding any fame.

Rafaello had initially been placed in charge, and then Xavier Gaziel had been sent from the capital. It had resulted in a complete reshuffle, with Zenjirou was now in charge in name, while Rafaello and Xavier had the same apparent power beneath him. However, Xavier commanded eighty percent of their manpower.

With Rafaello's role as staff officer, he had as much say in the strategy as Xavier did, but he would have almost no opportunity to take command on the battlefield. It was a blatant sign of a conflict between personnel assignments by Aura in the capital and Zenjirou here in Valentia.

"This might make a good tale to report to father," he murmured, his usual gentle smile on his face.



Meanwhile, Zenjirou was in the center of Valentia, within the duke's residence, as he stood hard-faced before the governor's—Lord Damian's—plea.

"Sir Zenjirou, I beg of you, will you not reconsider?"

Zenjirou looked back, keeping any expression from his face as he answered the entreating middle-aged man. "I will not."

"Sir Zenjirou..." Damian's eyes seemed to be covered in a thin film of tears. Causing a beautiful maiden to make that face would be one thing, but seeing it on a middle-aged man was just depressing. "Frankly, I cannot consent to you standing on the battlefield in person. If you were to be harmed, there is no way I could report such to Her Majesty Queen Aura in the capital," he continued in his attempt to persuade the prince consort. His warnings focused mainly around taking to the field personally and commanding the soldiers.

"Calling it a battlefield is excessive. I will be far away from the planned fighting," Zenjirou pointed out. He would be deployed a significant distance from where Xavier would be waiting in ambush, to provide defense to the unevacuated villages if the troops failed to guide the swarm effectively.

Naturally, Zenjirou would not personally be commanding the troops; that would be done by his staff officer, Rafaello. In other words, he would be a mere figurehead, even in battle.

Damian, however, wanted him to delegate the entirety of his role to Rafaello and stay within the city walls. In regard to overall efficiency, Damian's opinion was correct.

Zenjirou didn't *want* to expose himself to danger and was all too aware that he'd be nothing but an impediment on the battlefield.

I wish he wasn't arguing against it so ardently. I'm starting to doubt my decision now.

With no way of knowing his inner thoughts, Damian continued trying to persuade Zenjirou. "Still, the chance remains. If I may speak freely, your safety is more important than that of the city."

Zenjirou was one of only three royals in the country with the royal family's lineal magic. On top of that, he was the only adult male among them.

In hopes of increasing the number of holders of that lineal magic, it was no exaggeration to say he was more important than Aura or Carlos, a woman and infant respectively.

With that being stressed to him, he began to worry that his decision may be wrong. However, he shook off those thoughts and replied, "Regardless. This is an opportunity to build fame with very little risk. It is not something I can overlook." He was acting the model of a persistent, short-sighted man, ignoring the governor's advice.

Of course, Zenjirou wasn't aiming for acclaim in any way. In fact, once this situation was dealt with, he intended to work behind the scenes to make sure it was known that he had been nothing more than a figurehead.

So why was he going out of his way to leave the walls despite knowing it would be an impediment? Because this was a *subjugation* of the swarm raptors. In a defensive campaign, the commander could remain safe behind the walls, but that would not be allowed while on the offensive. In that case, the frontline commander would be seen as the highest authority involved, while the high-

ranking people behind the walls would automatically be seen as having ceded all authority to that person.

With the operation being carried out as a subjugation, it was a full-fledged offensive. You could argue that it was defensive from the perspective of defending Valentia against the threat of the swarm raptors, but Aura had taken it as a continuation of the subjugation of the salt road swarm raptors, so it was therefore officially classified as an offensive campaign.

If Xavier ends up taking the most responsibility, it will look like I, as a full proxy for the Duchess of Valentia, allowed interference from Queen Aura to change people's assignments.

If that happened then it would mean that the queen was interfering with the autonomy of a fiefdom. On the other hand, if Xavier was not placed in a leading position, it would mean that he, the prince consort, was ignoring directions from the queen.

Either way, it would cause problems, and his agonizing over it had produced this outcome. He would ensure that he personally had the responsibility on paper. On top of that, he would make sure it was obvious the actual operation was Xavier's domain while also appointing Rafaello—to whom he had entrusted the responsibility originally—as staff officer, to ensure that on paper both Rafaello and Xavier were equally responsible. At the same time, he would delegate the command of his personal guards to Rafaello so that he had command during the operation itself to a minimal extent.

Xavier, having been promised the role by Aura, would have to deal with it being in practice only, while Rafaello—who had already been given the role—would need to compromise with it being a strategic responsibility. Zenjirou himself, despite his reluctance, would have to take the “official” place as the responsible party. There were compromises to all three of their ideal solutions this way.

It feels more like balancing along a tightrope than sharing the loss, Zenjirou thought to himself as his stomach churned.

It still wouldn't entirely avoid political issues, but this was the most amicable situation he could think of. The main problem was that it would seem like he

was trying to make a name for himself, but he would just have to discuss that carefully with Aura later and deal with it.

“Then what of Princess Freya? If your guards are with you, only her own will remain here.”

As Damian continued, Zenjirou’s opinion of Damian rose while he commented internally on the fact that even if part of it was self-preservation, the man was certainly dedicated to his job.

“That will not be an issue. I have already discussed it with Her Highness and she happily agreed to accompany me. Of course, her guards will do so as well.”

While his tone was easy, what he said was far from inconsequential.

“She did? Impossible...” Damian was lost for words.

That was no surprise. To hear that it would not only be Zenjirou—one of the foremost nobles in the country—on the battlefield, but also Freya—who was officially recognized as a foreign princess—sounded like nothing more than a joke.

The issue was that they could not allow Zenjirou and his guards to leave the city while the princess remained. If his guards had left, the only remaining military force in Valentia would be the coastal guard patrols. If the worst came to pass and Freya decided to act maliciously, they might not be enough to stop her. Therefore, they needed to remove that possibility entirely by taking Freya and her guards out of the city with them.

“The decision has been made,” Zenjirou told him decisively.

“Very well,” the man managed eventually, his head lowering in dismay.



Two days later, the swarm raptors commenced their fourth attack. They struck the village along the river, where Xavier’s men had prepared their trap. The single instance wasn’t enough to tell whether it was due to Zenjirou’s idea or just a simple coincidence. Either way, it was the best result they could have asked for.

“The swarm raptors are here!” came the cry.

“Good! All hands, to your positions! All commands until the battle commences will be via hand signals. Don’t make a sound until then!” Xavier ordered.

With this final command given, he moved with his men to their shallow hole on the hill. They were coated from head to toe in grass stains and mud to hide their scents and were not the prettiest of sights.

The damp mud itched on his scalp, and some had gotten into his ears as he covered himself, making the inside of his ear feel gritty. He’d even gotten some of the grass juices by his mouth, so a harsh bitterness assaulted his tongue when he wet his lips. Everything about the situation was unpleasant and uncomfortable, but even so, Xavier held down his mental discomfort and waited.

Things have gone to plan so far. It ends here! he told himself as the acrid taste made his teeth clench.

He was eminently aware of how privileged a position he held. This was initially a duty that his father, the Margrave of Gaziel had acquired for him as a path to secure his succession. He had renounced his leadership role when it was beyond him and sought reinforcements from General Pujol, and now that the operation was in its final stage, he had overall command of the forces that would finish it. If he failed here, he would have no excuse to offer his father—who had made this possible for him—or to General Pujol or Queen Aura. That zeal, almost excitement, for the battle ahead, burned in his chest as he clenched his fist until, finally, the swarm raptors appeared.

“Grrargh!”

“Geegeee!”

The swarm was vast, certainly close to the hundred they had been told. Xavier’s rough estimation was perhaps a little less than ninety. The fact that the numbers didn’t reach a hundred could well be because of those slain in the second and third attacks.

The raptors halted for a moment at the village’s entrance, which was covered by a line of stakes set into the ground, their sharpened points facing out. However, it was only around shoulder height for a human; a little less, in fact.

“Gyaagyaagh!”

Its height was rather easy for the swarm raptors to jump. One by one, the mass of raptors leaped over it until one particularly large raptor from the original swarm jumped *into* it rather than over and destroyed the fence. It had proven utterly useless for stopping the beasts, but that wasn't an issue for their strategy.

The fence had never been meant to stop their advance; it had been to stop the bait in the form of the meat drakes from escaping. They, in comparison to the bipedal swarm raptors with their immense leg strength, were quadrupeds with short legs and heavy bodies. While the fence had been barely a stumbling block for the raptors, the cattle would never have been able to cross it.

The meat drakes squealed in panic as the horde of predators suddenly appeared.

Where's the huge boss? Xavier suddenly thought, poking his head up from the hole on the hill and seeing nothing that could be their leader. *This means that huge one won't leave the trees even for the bait.*

While it was somewhat disheartening, it wasn't really an issue. Part of the reason the village had been chosen was due to its distance from the trees. With the boss not making an appearance, they had succeeded in separating the forces from their commander.

The swarm raptors' tendency towards a quick flight was all due to their leader's decisiveness. Other than the anomalously intelligent massive example of the species, the other swarm raptors were merely wild animals, with the only intelligence they had being their instincts. The probability of the soldiers' success had just increased substantially.

As Xavier wet his lips, dry as they were from nerves, the cruel game of tag between the swarm raptors and meat drakes in the deserted village was reaching its finale.

“Geeegeee!”

“Wreee!”

“Gragh!”

Ordinarily, the meat drakes would be unable to escape the swarm raptors, but that was a problem for Xavier's men, so they had erected large wooden poles horizontally between the buildings to restrict the raptors' movements. These were at roughly chest level for a person, so the short-legged livestock could scurry underneath without issue, but the bipeds, significantly taller, had no choice but to jump over them.

As a result, the majority of the meat drakes managed to escape to the village square. The swarm raptors followed them, somewhat slower, and arrived there as well.

While it was called a square, it was really a small village's center and wouldn't fit all of the near-hundred swarm raptors. Regardless, Xavier wanted to ensure that their first strike was as effective as it could be, so he held back the urge to give the attack order and waited for the best moment.

Every one of the raptors was already within the village, and close to forty percent of them had now gathered in the square. As one might expect, there was no way the entirety of the livestock had managed to escape, and several swarm raptors could be seen happily gorging themselves on their catches, but it was within acceptable levels.

Okay, now!

Xavier felt the time was right and lifted his hand from where he lay, command whip in hand. He could hear the soldiers around him inhaling, tense. The men on the other hill could probably see him too, but if by some chance they couldn't, he had no way of checking.

His decision made, he swung the whip down through the air. A moment later, the men around him stood and drew their bows, then fired. Hundreds of arrows rained down on the swarm raptors chasing their prey, cutting swiftly through the air. There were three hundred archers on this hill and three hundred on the other. Combined, it was a volley of six hundred arrows.

"Gragh?!"

The creatures that could cry out in surprise were the lucky ones. Most of them had no idea what was going on and simply perished in the deluge of arrows from the sky.

Ordinarily, their resilience was impressive. One or two arrows wouldn't even be noticed (depending on where they hit), let alone kill them. However, it was another matter when there were less than a hundred of them, with six hundred arrows raining from the sky.

In addition, the Valentian soldiers were wielding longbows. Xavier's men in the march's army carried short bows, and there was a distinct difference in both range and strength. Naturally, they fell short of the wyvern bows of the Drake Marksmen Knights, but the terrain compensated for that. The archers were firing from atop the hills into the gathering of swarm raptors in the valley. With the terrain on their side, their weapons stood equal to wyvern bows on flat ground.

It went without saying that they couldn't pull off a miracle at this range and aim at only the swarm raptors without touching the meat drakes, so having wonderfully fulfilled their role as bait, most of the drakes were slain as well. It was an unfortunate but necessary sacrifice.

Despite that, a single volley wouldn't take out nearly a hundred raptors on its own. Many of them had been sheltered by houses and the like and had escaped unscathed.

"Greeee!"

Several of the survivors chose to counterattack the now-visible soldiers on the hills rather than flee. A slight incline was nothing to them. Using their two massive legs and even bigger tail, they rushed up the hill faster than any human would be capable of. However, this too was as expected.

"Archers, fall back; pikemen to the front!"

In response to his command, men wielding long spears took the place of the archers. The spears were around twice their wielders' heights, so of course, wielding them freely was impossible for normal soldiers. Still, simply thrusting their points into the charging raptors was enough.

"Gyahh!"

"Geegeee?!"

However impressive their jumping abilities were, the beasts couldn't leap

over the wall of spears on such a steep incline. The tips dug into the raptors' flesh, and they could advance no further.

Ordinarily, a human would have no chance of standing against the raptors' charge, but this was another advantage of the terrain. The overall effect of the soldiers thrusting their spears down the slope with the raptors rushing up meant that the difference in momentum was just about equalized—or maybe even overcome—by the greater elevation.

“Guhgyaa!”

Several of the creatures slipped back from the spearmen, and those that managed to stay upright were shot from between the spearmen by the archers as they had established their formation once again.

“Gee!”

Before long, the few attacking raptors had been laid to rest without reaching their goal. Throughout the string of battles, Xavier watched the fighting almost distantly.

“Amazing... So, this is what General Pujol meant back then.”

Something the general had said came back to Xavier's mind. He had said that the strength of humanity lay in their techniques, weapons, and cooperation. At the time, the general had just taken down one of the raptors on his own, so Xavier had let it pass in amusement, but seeing the situation unfolding in front of his eyes let him feel the truth of the general's words.

With the constraints of the battle on the salt road, the march's army had been forced into a difficult conflict. In the mountain hunt following, even General Pujol's elite Drake Marksmen Knights had struggled to kill a few of the raptors. But with the terrain and numbers on their side, their own strength was visibly overwhelming. With the short spears and bows swapped out for long spears and bows for open terrain, coupled with no longer rushing in towards the enemy but rather luring them to a prepared battleground, the soldiers were all in sync as they attacked.

Such a simple change had led to a vastly more favorable outcome. Keeping his excitement in check, Xavier took another look at the battlefield. The outcome

was already decided, but they were still mopping up the remnants of the assault. The sight before him offered a sudden temptation. With the state things were in, could he not also attack? While he wasn't boastful of it, he was sure his archery skills were at least on the level of the other soldiers around him.

However, as he looked at his hands with those thoughts in mind, he saw the item he was holding, which soon doused the flames of his frenzy. Gripped within his fist was not his familiar bow or spear. No, he held a command whip. It was a thin stick of wood, with nearly no offensive capability.

Right, my role isn't to defeat a raptor or two on my own, it's to command my subordinates so that they can take down far more and aren't sacrificed, to the greatest extent possible.

The young commander, once more recognizing his role in the battle, surveyed the field again and gave his orders.

“Northern hill, by the river! Four raptors fleeing. They're aiming for the water—take them down before they make it!”

In the end, under Xavier's command, only a few of the raptors succeeded in getting through the trap.



A while earlier, when Xavier and his men were lying in wait as the swarm raptors entered their trap, an exceptionally large raptor was visible in the trees. Its size would confuse anyone with even minimal knowledge of the species by how far away it was. The creature was at least two heads taller than the average swarm raptor. The species was normally classed as midsize, but the excessive size of this particular specimen would make one want to classify it as a large drake.

However, its size was not the reason it had concerned the elite of Capua despite merely being a meat-eating drake. The cause for concern was that it had grown in intelligence as it had in years, and that intellect made it both prudent and decisive. Even as its subordinates gave in to hunger and charged at the village, the massive drake alone remained within the trees.

Of course, this was a right afforded to it because its subordinates would return with meat, but it still showed an unusual amount of caution. One might even call it cowardice. This prudence, however, was now on full display.

Xavier had just waved his baton on the hill and signaled for the volley of arrows to descend upon the swarm raptors. The sound of six hundred arrows cutting through the air barely reached the raptor's ears along with its subordinates' death throes as it lurked in the wood.

"Grrrrr!"

The sound was not enough to get a clear understanding of the situation, but both its instincts and intelligence told it that there was something *off* about the situation. Should it run? The option flashed through the massive drake's mind, awfully sharp for its species. However, even if it roared its loudest to signal retreat, its subordinates would not hear it in the midst of the battle. Despite that, the creature didn't have the option to flee alone and abandon its pack.

Its size and intelligence had grown with its age, but it had lost things in exchange. One of them was its agility, while another was its resistance to hunger. The too-big raptor had lost its maneuverability in exchange for its strength, leading to its hunting skills deteriorating. Despite that, it needed vast amounts of meat to maintain its huge body. So the creature had become dependent on its subordinates and the meat they provided for its survival. It was parasitic on the swarm in some ways.

"Guhhh..."

It took a step out as if it had made a decision after its thought. There was nothing to provide cover and hide it between the trees and the village. Its orders wouldn't reach those attacking the village unless it could cross around half of the plains between them.

It continued in this way for a while before it stopped upon spotting a figure standing in its path.

"Gruuu?"

It was a fully armed human warrior. The raptor was aware of the dangers an armed human represented. If there had been a hundred of them, it would have

decided to abandon its subordinates and flee. Actually, considering the current lack of subordinates around, it might have made the same decision if there were only ten. That was just how careful and timid the creature was. That cowardice could be said to have allowed it to survive this long and grow beyond the norm for swarm raptors.

However, there were not a hundred warriors in front of it. There were not even ten. There was, in fact, only one. Considering the differences between the huge raptor and the human, the phrase “standing in its path” wasn’t quite correct.

The warrior in its way—Victoria Kronkvist—had her golden hair tied behind her, and it swayed in the wind as she examined the creature, not an ounce of aggression on her face.

“I see, so this is the huge raptor? It certainly is exceptionally large,” she said, hefting her beloved short spear in both hands.

While Xavier guided the main force, Zenjirou and Freya had taken up a position some distance away as a precaution in case the plan failed. The first problem with that strategy was how to deal with the raptors’ massive leader.

With the distance between the bait and the trees being what it was, the assumption had been that even the boss would have joined the attack this time. However, such assumptions *were* only assumptions, and they knew that might not be the case. What would they do, then? It didn’t even need thinking about: they would require a separate force specifically for the boss raptor.

However, the one in charge of such a force had a massive dilemma. After all, their assumptions were based on the likelihood of the boss attacking the village. In other words, if things went as planned, they would finish the operation having done nothing.

However, if their concerns were realized, defeating the boss would bring the most renown, particularly with its habit of fleeing now being common knowledge. It was a position that would either see those involved left with nothing to do or attaining the greatest accolades. It also required the ability to prevent the beast from fleeing.

The decision was an extremely difficult one. Initially, Raffaello had even

suggested handling it himself. However, having heard their plans, Victoria Kronkvist had nominated herself.

“I have a plan to prevent it from fleeing,” she had said, her face brimming with confidence. “The beast runs at the slightest disadvantage. How would you deal with it without letting it escape?” she mused to herself unconcernedly. “The answer is simple. You confront it with an extremely small force that seems to be no threat.”

She was now approaching the creature with an utter lack of visible wariness. The average person would never call this “a simple answer” if they heard it. It was “an insane answer.”

Humans could not win against drakes in a one-on-one fight. Even though swarm raptors were considered weak for carnivorous drakes, a fight without ranged weapons was said to take at least three average soldiers to manage a win. Even the elites of the Drake Marksmen Knights would suffer losses if each knight faced a swarm raptor using only a spear and sword, to say nothing of the fact that this huge specimen was well outside the norm. It had a tendency towards caution and flight, but that did not mean it was weak. After all, other raptors wouldn’t follow a weak leader in the wild. The creature had led up to five hundred raptors, so an average soldier would be nothing in the face of its might if the creature felt like flexing.

“Greee!”

Right now, the raptor most definitely felt like showing its might. The beast was scared of groups of intelligent humans, but it didn’t see itself as so lowly that it would fear facing a single one. Yet, the warrior standing before it was much the same in her lack of fear.

“I have heard the great witch Skaji took down a wicked black dragon unaided. As the partial successor to her name, I would be unworthy of the honor given to me by my country if I could not handle a drake of this level.”

As she spoke, the warrior—Skaji—pointed the tip of her spear at the center of the raptor.

“Graaah!”

Even the warrior, with her abnormal height for a woman, was clearly outmatched in size. If the raptor had been able to see her alongside an average woman, it would probably consider the difference in height “within reasonable error.”

Skaji was completely covered by the beast’s shadow as it thundered across the ground. However, the Northern warrior showed no sign of concern. In fact, she took a quick step towards the oncoming drake and swung her spear to the side.

“Gyah?!”

The raptor roared in rage at the slice across its abdomen, flailing its short forelegs. It was, obviously, an attack with no technique behind it. Regardless, it still had more force than a trained man could achieve with a sword.

Skaji stopped the attack with the spear in her hands. Well, strictly speaking, she didn’t *stop* it. Her skillful spear handling allowed her to move at exactly the right moment and angle to direct the descending claws away from her head. So far, she hadn’t taken a single step in retreat.

“Incredible. I suppose such force should be expected from a drake.”

While her words indicated some wariness of the huge raptor’s attack, she had just taken that attack head-on and deflected it. It wasn’t a defensive battle either. While the ratio was one attack to the two swipes the beast had taken, Skaji was still using her spear to attack as well. While she had turned all of the raptor’s attacks aside, each time she swung her spear it cut through the beast’s thick skin, causing scarlet blood to well forth. Within moments, the green of the grassy plains was dyed red by the thick drake blood.

“Geee!” the raptor roared in fury at the realization that the battle was not going as expected. The wounds it had received so far were no real detriment. However, not one of its attacks had landed, and the fury at the one-sided slicing that was currently ongoing made it forget its hard-earned intelligence and grow more aggressive. “Guuuh...groooah!”

The raptor stopped swinging its clawed forearms and instead moved to collide bodily with the warrior as if saying that she wouldn’t be able to block *that*. And indeed, even Skaji was unable to turn aside a direct charge. However, she didn’t

make any major movements to evade it.

“There,” she decided, having seen that the creature lacked maneuverability. She took a small step to the side, and the two of them passed close enough that her left shoulder rubbed along the raptor’s left leg. Of course, she wasn’t taking such a risk for some test of courage.

“Hah!”

As they passed, Skaji thrust her spear with her right hand. It went diagonally, and with an almost metallic screech lopped off the tip of the raptor’s tail.

“Gyah?!”

Compared to its length, the severed piece was only the smallest amount of the tail. Not even ten centimeters. However, the raptor struggled to deal with the pain of losing part of its body. The raptor bellowed loudly enough that the faint of heart would weaken.

Naturally, Skaji was practically the antonym of faint of heart. She didn’t even flinch at the roar, merely pressing her offensive as if this was a good chance.

“Shagyahh! G-Geee!”

Thus, it continued, the raptor flailed its forelegs while Skaji counterattacked and parried its attempts.

Closer inspection made it clear that the battle was steadily falling Skaji’s way. Earlier, she had got in one attack for every two swipes the raptor made, but now she swung her spear each time the beast charged.

There was, of course, no change in the way each of the raptor’s attacks was turned aside, while every attack that Skaji made found its mark. The difference was that the raptor was missing part of its tail. Almost all tailed animals, not just swarm raptors, used their tails as a large part of keeping their balance. That was particularly evident in bipeds like swarm raptors. Even if it was just ten centimeters, a loss of what it centered its balance around would inevitably have a huge impact on its movements. With enough time, the raptor might be able to learn how its shorter tail and body interacted to overcome the imbalance caused, but Skaji would never permit that.

“Gyah, gyah, gahhh!”

The raptor’s roar grew gradually more panicked as its flailing attacks failed to land. Attacking even more when panicked like this was the act of a third-rate combatant.

“It’s going well,” Skaji said, dispassionately repeating her actions, her expression unchanging. She would ward off a blow from above with her spear, then use the raptor’s loss of balance to attack again.

These attacks only resulted in shallow wounds. A thrust or stepping in closer to slash more deeply and damage it more ran the risk of the spear getting stuck. Taking just a single blow would result in a complete reversal of their situation. A veteran warrior would never forget that, no matter how much of an advantage they had.

Every wound, even small ones, led to the beast losing blood more quickly. The battlefield was already covered in a pool of red flowing from the creature. If the viscous liquid managed to trip Skaji up, the situation would change, but she’d expected this to happen and so her shoes had small spikes in their soles. Even with the pool of slippery blood beneath her feet, those spikes drove holes into the ground beneath her feet and kept her footing firm, so there was very little chance of her slipping.

“Gyahh!”

Anger had turned to panic, and panic had turned to hesitancy, and that had eventually turned into fear. This small human was strong—stronger than the raptor itself, even alone. That realization, albeit rather late, led to an immediate decision.

“Geee!”

However intelligent it had become, it had no human emotions like shame or fear for its reputation. Therefore it pivoted in place and sprinted towards the trees at full speed. The loss of blood and its tail meant that its movements were slower than normal, but it was still far faster than a human could run. If she chased after it, it would escape.

However, there was not one sliver of unease on Skaji’s face, even now. Her

ever-calm gaze was focused on the fleeing raptor as she gripped her spear just below the tip with her right hand and began to chant.

“Imbue my spear with the power of fire, hot enough to melt the very earth! As payment, I give 108 offerings of mana to the spirits of flame!”

The chant soon took effect, and the spear tip began to glow with scarlet flame. Anyone who saw it would be shocked by both her audacity and calmness. That was how difficult casting magic on the battlefield was.

Magic required the correct pronunciation, the correct amount of mana, and a correct mental image. Using it while in battle was most restricted by the third of those points. The successful use of magic required the only thing in one’s mind to be an image of the spell’s result, even if it was only for an instant.

It left an absurd number of openings for error. On the battlefield, it was akin to being completely unconscious for up to several seconds.

What was more, the caster had to purposefully put themselves into that defenseless state. The average person would be too concerned with the situation they were in and unable to muster the necessary concentration.

However, it had not seemed particularly difficult for Skaji. Once she had seen the magic take effect, she held it across her back with both hands.

A moment later, she began to spin. One step, two, three. The third step marked exactly 360 degrees, and Skaji used the force of her rotation to hurl the spear at the fleeing raptor.

It was less like the method used in a javelin throw and more like that with a discus. Her movement didn’t stop there, though; before the projectile could travel far, she made another half turn and used a reverse roundhouse kick to strike the butt of the spear.

The weapon had already had the force of her spin behind it before her kick accelerated it even further as it sped towards the fleeing raptor. Even disregarding that additional kick, spinning gave more force to the spear than a standard throw. However, it also hindered the combatant’s control over where that throw would go.

Such concerns were unnecessary for the superhuman warrior, however.

“Gya?!”

Her spear pierced the raptor’s head without issue, jutting out, having easily passed through the thick skin and skull.

As drakes had relatively little space in their skull taken up by their brains, it wouldn’t necessarily be a fatal wound, but that was not all the spear had done. The tip of it was alight with magic fire. That fire quickly expanded within its skull and heated the creature’s brain, boiling it.

“Guh...guuuhh...”

It managed a single last step towards the trees before falling to the floor with a huge crash.

“It looks like I managed to take it down safely,” the warrior said, her expression finally softening slightly as she approached the drake she had defeated with light steps. Just in case, she drew the sword at her waist and held it in her right hand, her prudence visible in the act as it always was.

However, there was a rustling sound before she could reach the corpse as several figures appeared from the trees and approached the giant corpse.

“Whoa, she really took down that huge thing all on her own.”

“That’s our Skaji; common sense don’t apply to her.”

“Is she really a woman?”

“I think you mean ‘is she really a human?’”

These were warriors from the *Glasiir’s Leaf* who had hidden in the trees at her direction. Even Skaji wasn’t conceited enough to assume definitively that she would be able to defeat her enemy alone. Therefore, she had ordered the men to stay in the woods to cut off its retreat. If the raptor had proven too much for her, she would have given the signal for them to aid her.

Fortunately, both precautions had proven unnecessary, but there was no way of being certain of the outcome beforehand, and she had no intention of abandoning her liege in these foreign lands and returning to the earth.

As a precautionary measure, she picked up some stones as she approached and threw several into the creature’s still-open eye. When it didn’t react, she

was finally convinced of its death and planted her foot on its huge head to pull the spear from where it was deeply embedded.

“Phew!”

The spear was stuck through the beast’s thick skull but Skaji was both skilled and strong, so she was able to get it out without issue. Thick, hot brain fluids leaked from the hole it had created. Skaji moved back quickly to avoid the hot fluid landing on her feet before checking over the spear’s tip.

“I’ll need to sharpen this some,” she murmured as she did.

Even her beloved spear, made from a tusk, had lost some of its edge in the vicious fight.

“I hope I can find something fitting until I get it sharpened,” she added in a murmur before facing her subordinates for the first time and speaking with a small smile. “Right, everyone muster. If we’re not missing anyone, we’ll return. Come on, the princess is waiting for our report.”

The men all knew she was a warrior beyond them, even being a woman, and trusted in her completely.

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Got it!”

“Understood!”

While the words didn’t match, the burly men all followed the tall woman willingly as they left the place.



While Xavier’s men took down the main swarm and Skaji faced the alpha in one-on-one combat, Zenjirou’s detachment was far away from the battlefield and ready for any unforeseen eventualities.

In truth, that was just a pretext, and it would be more accurate to say they were being kept from the battlefield. Of course, Zenjirou was well aware of that distinction and didn’t feel at all dissatisfied with it. If anything, when he compared that to the possibility of something unforeseen actually happening, he was nothing but grateful for such a distinction.

He had only persisted in his own deployment for political reasons and would have been a detriment to the actual events. From that perspective, he felt some obligation to the girl standing next to him for making her go along with his political actions.

Zenjirou was clad in leather armor that suited him even less than his formalwear as he addressed Freya at his side.

“Are you well, Your Highness? If you are tired, I can have a chair brought out.”

The Uppasalan princess smiled gracefully at his question before answering with a much more poised expression than his own. “My thanks, Your Majesty. You need not worry, though.”

It was a simple fact that however low the chance of the swarm raptors coming here was, it was far more dangerous for them to be there than to stay in Valentia.

Zenjirou was on the verge of delirium from his nerves even now and continued with some pointless questioning to distract himself.

“You seem rather calm. Have you taken part in such operations before, perhaps?”

It seemed to be something she hadn’t expected, though, as her emerald eyes widened.

“Not at all. This is the first time I have stood waiting for an attack. I’ve been rather excited, to be frank. I seemed calm to you?”

“Well, how should I say it? I suppose you are bolder than you look...”

He would have been able to understand if she’d said that she was on edge, but excitement was beyond his expectations for the princess. Freya’s skin hadn’t darkened in the slightest under the Southern Continent’s sun, and her pale face curled into a refined smile.

“I had heard that land drakes were used as livestock here, but it is still impressive to see.”

As she spoke, her gaze was on the dash drakes the knights were riding.

“Are land drakes rare on the Northern Continent?” Zenjirou asked casually.

“They are,” she answered dutifully. “There are very few land drakes that live on the continent. We have the aquatic species even in the North, so drakes themselves aren’t particularly rare.”

“I see. I suppose it is due to the sea being continuous, unlike the land.”

“Indeed. Hence why the sea route is considered much more dangerous on the Northern Continent. Of course, ships and sailing are far more advanced nowadays, so it is not as dangerous as it might sound.”

The call came as Zenjirou and Freya were continuing their meandering conversation.

“Sir Zenjirou.”

The words came from the approaching man who held command, Rafaello Márquez, rather than Zenjirou, who was nothing more than a burden in this military situation.

While it might have been Zenjirou’s imagination, the man’s smile seemed brighter than usual.

“What is it, Rafaello?”

Rafaello answered the prince consort’s short question with a full-faced smile, giving the best news possible. “A moment ago, a messenger arrived from both Lord Xavier’s forces and Lady Victoria’s almost simultaneously. I am told Lord Xavier faced the main force and killed the majority of the swarm with no fatalities on our side. Lady Victoria fought the alpha in another location and killed it.”

Zenjirou couldn’t restrain a cheer at the long-awaited news. “Oh! They managed it?!”

“Congratulations, Your Majesty,” Freya offered with a soft smile as if she had expected this result.

“Thank you. It was only possible with your aid. Your guards are truly capable.”

Zenjirou incorrectly assumed from the report that Skaji’s forces had fought the boss raptor as one rather than the warrior woman facing it on her own.

“Thank you. I am sure she will appreciate hearing that you think so.”

For her part, Skaji had already informed Freya that she would be challenging the beast alone, but she didn't correct the misunderstanding and merely smiled politely. She was certain that her trusted confidant had indeed taken the beast down with no assistance, but Skaji had stated that if things looked bad, she would immediately call for aid. If Freya spoke carelessly and contradicted the truth, it would bring shame on Skaji.

"Sir, Your Highness, the battle has now finished. I apologize for the rush, but I believe it would be best to begin our return to Valentia at once. Would you be willing?" Raffaello asked.

Naturally, Zenjirou didn't disagree. "Understood. We'll leave as soon as the preparations are complete."

"Very well, sir. Lord Xavier's report stated that a small number of the raptors fled and managed to escape. They have likely returned to the trees, but the risk remains."

"Indeed."

Zenjirou shuddered at Raffaello's explanation. The fight had taken place on the opposite side of Valentia, so the probability of the fleeing raptors coming this far was essentially zero. Even so, the possibility weighed on him.

Raffaello seemed to intuit his discomfort. "Do not worry, Sir Zenjirou. If they do arrive here, we have the forces on hand to easily deal with a few raptors," he told Zenjirou, smiling.

"I know," Zenjirou replied somewhat quickly as it felt like Raffaello was looking through him.

Raffaello had readied a carriage drawn by two dash drakes for Zenjirou—despite the fact that it was much slower—as he was incapable of riding one himself. The carriage was relatively small and could carry four people, but only three were currently seated within: Zenjirou, Freya, and Zenjirou's maid, Ines. The two royals were seated side by side, while Ines sat opposite Zenjirou.

It was certainly much better than walking, but the lack of any real suspension meant that riding over unpaved grassland was by no means comfortable. Opening one's mouth carelessly offered a good chance of biting one's tongue.

The outbound trip had made Zenjirou painfully aware of that, so he didn't speak. Therefore, the carriage ride progressed in silence.

Freya also remained quiet, not actively questioning Zenjirou's disposition, which increased his sense of patheticness.

After a long period of silence, the carriage came to a stop almost halfway along its route back.

"What?" Zenjirou blurted out, breaking the silence.

"Perhaps it is a rest stop?" the princess suggested. "The soldiers do need to heed the call of nature as well."

"Ah, I see."

The phrase "the call of nature" made Zenjirou understand what was happening. Essentially, this was a toilet break. While ready for battle the soldiers were probably told to "hold on for the big ones, and go while you fight for the little," but when they had the latitude, a good commander would set aside time like this.

Of course, the "good commander" in this instance wasn't the figurehead, Zenjirou. Here and now, it referred to the commander-in-truth under him, Rafaello Márquez.

"Well then, Sir Zenjirou. If I may excuse myself for a moment?" Ines asked, standing.

Zenjirou wasn't thoughtless enough to question her and simply nodded with as short an answer as possible. "Indeed."

Time passed as they waited. Then Zenjirou thought he could hear a bit of a commotion outside.

"Did something happen?" he asked.

"Perhaps? Things do seem somewhat hectic out there."

He and Freya were alone, so their puzzlement would find no answers inside the carriage. The long period of sitting had made Zenjirou's joints stiff, so he decided to get out for a while.

“What is it? Did something happen?” he asked as he exited.

There were several soldiers guarding the carriage. One of them, apparently the highest-ranking, rushed over to Zenjirou and gave a somewhat agitated report.

“Sir, your maid just sighted some swarm raptors.”

“What?!” he exclaimed, unable to keep his voice down at the shocking statement. “Is she safe?!”

The soldier realized from Zenjirou’s reaction that his explanation had been lacking and hurriedly corrected himself.

“Ah, m-my apologies! I misspoke. Madam Ines discovered their corpses. It appears they had already expired when she found them, and the three had all fallen together.”

It went without saying that Ines wouldn’t relieve herself in the same place the soldiers were using. She had moved to a space where she wasn’t in sight of the soldiers and found the corpses there. They had probably been wounded during their engagement with Xavier’s men and barely managed to flee with deep wounds before they finally died, the soldier explained.

“I see, thank you for your report,” Zenjirou replied now that he was assured of Ines’s safety before moving towards the curious onlookers himself.

He knew that Ines was unharmed, but he still felt slightly worried about a woman seeing the animals’ bodies like that. Also, corpses though they may be, he wanted to see the swarm raptors that had caused the country so much trouble.

“Please wait, Sir Zenjirou!”

His guards hurriedly formed a perimeter around him as he moved, and he finally reached the crowd of onlookers with Ines in its center.

“Ines,” he said. His voice parted the crowd.

“Oh, Sir Zenjirou. I apologize for worrying you,” she replied with a deep bow. At least on the surface, she didn’t seem to have been particularly affected.

“As long as you are safe, that’s all that matters. I suppose it was somewhat

unpleasant. Are you hurt?" As he spoke, Zenjirou's gaze found its way to the thing behind her.

"No, my clothes were somewhat soiled due to the shock, but fortunately I am unharmed," she answered.

Indeed, her long skirt's hem and her tied-up hair had some flecks of red in them.

"I see. You should change when we return."

Even as he answered, he was no longer concerned about her.

So, this is a swarm raptor!

The image of a carnivorous drake, even a dead one, was a rather large shock to him. It was roughly the same size as a dash drake, but the main differences were the claws on its forelegs as well as its fangs. The claws were the size of Zenjirou's arm, while the longest and thickest of the fangs were about the size of his hand.

A closer look revealed that all three creatures had horizontal slashes across their throats. The wounds were deep enough that an average animal would be unable to even cry out their death throes before expiring.

These beasts had fled this far from the battle with Xavier's forces? Their resilience was far beyond anything he had ever imagined.

Having seen their corpses now, Zenjirou understood all too well. *A hundred of these monsters being in the area was something I called "relatively safe" when I walked around.*

He was finally aware of just how big of a deal they were, even if he had been guarded. His head felt chilled, his limbs too, even his very heart.

While he had understood intellectually, he had to admit he hadn't had an intuitive sense of the dangers of this world. Damian was most certainly a loyal retainer. While a formal apology might have been difficult with his position as prince consort, Zenjirou would have to see the man rewarded for his advice in some way.

I'll never do this again. I'll stay behind the walls. Aura would forgive a little

political upheaval for that, at least, he vowed to himself. That vow was perhaps the greatest thing to have come out of the entire affair.

Epilogue

Seven days later, a figure with a status eclipsing even Zenjirou's was within the ducal estate.

There was only one person with a higher rank than Zenjirou in his position of Prince Consort of Capua: Queen Aura herself.

The original plan had been for Zenjirou and everyone else to return in a special carriage, but apparently, the details of the swarm raptor subjugation contained in the missive sent via wyvern was a shock even to Aura. Enough so that she used all three of her maximum uses of teleportation within a day to go and fetch her husband.

The first to greet her upon her arrival was Rafaello Márquez.

"Good day, Your Majesty. This is a rather sudden visit," he said.

The man was one of her prior candidates for marriage and had probably expected the situation to some extent. The only sign of his surprise was a slight widening of his eyes as he welcomed the queen.

"This is an unofficial visit. I will be returning at once with my husband, so you need not spread the news."

"Understood, Your Majesty. I shall guide you to Sir Zenjirou." With those words, he immediately moved off to lead her.

"Indeed."

The two walked through the corridors of the estate somewhat more quickly than usual. Eventually, they reached Zenjirou's room, and the middle-aged maid in a scarlet uniform gave them a refined curtsy.

"Welcome, Your Majesty. Sir Zenjirou is inside."

"Very well. It sounds like you have been a considerable help to him, so allow me to offer my thanks."

"It is more than I deserve, Your Majesty."

Rafaello, having guided her this far, excused himself from Ines and Aura as they exchanged greetings.

“Ah, Rafaello. I hear you have done the same. My thanks to you as well.”

“Not at all, Your Majesty. I was aided very much by Sir Zenjirou’s wise decisions.” Rafaello left after offering those words to her.

“Tch,” Aura scowled unhappily upon hearing Rafaello evaluate her husband as “wise.” But she decided that it wasn’t the time to concern herself with that and faced the door of Zenjirou’s room once again.

The queen shot a look at Ines, who answered, “At once,” and gave a practiced knock on the door before calling inside, “Sir Zenjirou, your escort has arrived. May I show them in?”

A slightly confused voice answered her.

“An escort? Who? Well, regardless, sure thing.”

With the answer given, Ines slowly opened the door, and Aura stepped inside at the same time. Then the maid closed the door so as to not interfere with the couple’s meeting.

“What? No way—Aura?! How come?!” he cried out in surprise.

“As Ines just said, I am here to escort you home. I do not have much time to spend here, so we will be departing presently.”

As those words came through the door, Ines thought she could hear a clatter.

“Huh, right now?! Wait a minute; I need to get my stuff together.”

“Just bring the essentials. The rest will be returned with Ines and the others on the carriage.”

“Uh, got it. Just a sec. Uh, my clothes, the flashlight... Huh? Where’s my multitool?”

“Are you ready? You are? Then here we go. *Send all things in the space that I envision to the place—*”

“Wait, right now?! I need to calm down first!”

Eventually, nothing more was audible from inside.

When the silence was absolute, Ines waited another moment and knocked softly before opening the door and peering inside.

“Sir Zenjirou? Your Majesty?” she called, but she received no reply. The only sign that someone had been living in the room until just a moment before was the faint scent of a person and their warmth, but the resident in question had simply vanished. “It seems they are safely home,” she said with a soft smile as she stepped into the now-deserted chamber.



If Zenjirou’s departure was sudden, then so was his arrival. He had no real idea of the distance between the capital and Valentia. He had effectively been abducted by his wife back to the capital, but it would appear that her statement of there being no time was no falsehood. As soon as she had seen him to the inner palace, the queen had headed for the palace proper. They would have no time to sit and talk things through in full until the sun completely set.

“Phew, I might feel a bit pulled around, but it’s good to be home,” Zenjirou said once he’d bathed and had his fill of the inner palace’s cooking.

He was now in his pajamas and lounging on the sofa. The room was filled with bright, white light from the six LED lamps in the room. As night fell, he took some cold fruit juice from the fridge that also stood in the bright room and took a drink. Having been away made him appreciate electricity all the more.

That said, he couldn’t just laze around; he needed to speak with his beloved wife—Queen Aura. He hadn’t seen her for some time, and she was as beguiling as ever.

Seeing her up close in her red negligee-type nightwear made him want to skip the arduous chat and just move straight to bed, but such conversations were among the sad realities of being a royal. He decided to get the annoyances out of the way as soon as possible and make the time for them to be happy and shameful together.

With that in mind, he moved from his slouched position to a more upright one, facing his wife with good posture.

“Right, let’s get going then,” he said.

“Indeed. I would hear from you first. What possessed you? Whatever the particulars may be, you left the city walls and took command? Explain that in detail.”

Aura’s expression as she spoke was serious and held a great deal of suppressed emotion.

This was not something he could laugh off as a joke. While he’d not had any inclination to do so in the first place, her expression stressed that, and he began speaking with a practically unprecedentedly serious expression of his own.

“Sure. Where do I start? There’s the events with Princess Freya and then with the huge raptor. They’re separate topics but there is some connection there. Well, first of all...”

And thus began Zenjirou’s long, *long* explanation.

“...and I realized what danger I’d put myself in once I saw the raptors for the first time, even if it was just their bodies. I guess that’s about it?”

By the time he had finished conveying everything, around an hour and a half had passed.

“I...see.”

Aura had begun their discussion with an almost accusatory look, but as she listened, her expression had gradually changed. When she heard that Zenjirou had already chosen Rafaello to command the subjugation by the time she had sent Xavier, her face drained of color completely.

Regardless, she had composed herself after a few moments and listened to the whole of Zenjirou’s tale, which was perhaps to be expected of a queen.

“Yeah, that’s about the size of it. Back then, I was the full proxy of the Duke of Valentia, and you temporarily had none of those rights, did you? So I thought I couldn’t just follow your instructions straight off. Did I overthink it?” he asked cautiously, only to be answered with an expressionless shake of Aura’s head.

“No, you were correct in your judgment. If you had done as I directed and simply dismissed Rafaello and installed Xavier in his place, I would have taken a lot of grief from the feudal lords.”

“Phew, that’s great,” Zenjirou answered, smiling somewhat happily at his decision to help Aura. “But, well...I’m the prince consort, and you’re the queen, right? So I figured if I just ignored your instructions, that’d be bad too, so I tried to follow them as much as possible while keeping Rafaello in mind, and the only way I could think of was with me at the top. Sorry that I did something stupid and worried you.”

He lowered his head deeply, and she shook her head wordlessly before answering. “No...I should be the one apologizing. You did nothing but risk yourself in order to correct my blunder.”

There was no doubt that if Zenjirou had taken any other course, things would have gotten much more complicated. If he had followed her instructions and placed Xavier in the top position as she had instructed, the feudal lords would not have remained silent. Conversely, if he had completely ignored her orders and kept Rafaello in place, it would have resulted in Aura’s promise to Xavier being broken. That would have, in turn, led to Margrave Gaziel—supporting Xavier—refusing to remain silent and could have even required Aura to levy some kind of punishment on Zenjirou.

That wasn’t to say there were no issues with Zenjirou’s choice, but it was far less harmful than the other two options. It was, without a doubt, a fine move on his part.

However, even understanding that, she looked all the more seriously at him and spoke. “However, I will tell you this now: avoid doing such things again. Your decision this time was no mistake, and you achieved the best result conceivable, which I thank you deeply for. Even so, if it exposes you to danger. I would much prefer to make the mistake and deal with the political uproar.”

Her statement was by no means only driven by emotion. Zenjirou was currently the only adult male with their royal line’s lineal magic, and that was just how valuable his life was. Political blunders could be mitigated, and any uproar from the feudal lords would settle eventually. However, if they lost Zenjirou, Capua would lose at least a generation of their greatest goal of rebuilding the royal family.

Still, pragmatism aside, his wife’s almost painful level of concern got through

to Zenjirou, and he nodded in answer. “Yeah, got it. I won’t do it again.”

“Right, thank you.”

Silence reigned for a while. Eventually, Zenjirou was the one to break it. “So, to change the topic a bit, we managed to arrange a trade agreement with Princess Freya, though I’m not sure whether I should say we finished it without incident or just with modest conditions.”

Zenjirou had originally left for Valentia in order to meet with the princess from the Northern Continent. The latter half of the visit had been engulfed in panic over the swarm raptors, so it had stuck out much less, but it was the main thrust of their meeting in another way than the issue of the raptors had been.

“Indeed. Direct trade with a country on the Northern Continent without interference from any others on our own continent. Our prospects have considerably expanded. We were also successful in participating in the ship’s repair as well, no? We will not know until we can speak with the specialists, but we may even gain at least domestic ships of a significantly larger size during my reign.” As Aura spoke, her eyes took on a completely different light, full of ambition.

“This is just my impression, but that princess is no ordinary person, so you need to take care. It feels like if you let your guard down, she’ll take your legs out from under you,” Zenjirou replied, making sure to add his own warning.

On the surface, Freya was certainly a model princess, exceedingly amiable and graceful. However, considering she had left alone on this intercontinental voyage, she was certainly no ordinary royal. She claimed that her goal was to make gains for her homeland, but they didn’t know the circumstances behind her choice to determine if that was all or if she intended to get benefits for her own country by preying on Capua.

“Very well, I shall take care. However, she gifted us these ‘goats’ as a celebration of Carlos’s birth, did she not? I shall have to thank her when we meet.”

“Yeah. Honestly, that’s the best thing I gained out of this. Ah, they’re still in Valentia, though, so I’ll have to get them moved here. Who do we get to look after them? There’s no one in the country familiar with rearing mammals, is

there?”

He'd heard that goat husbandry was relatively simple, but it would still be more than a complete amateur could handle. As Zenjirou fretted, Aura answered with a smile.

“We shall send someone to Princess Freya to learn. This is the first time you have actively sought anything. I would be all too happy to make preparations.”

“Thank you, Aura!”

Her claim that she would be all too happy was no falsehood. This was quite literally the first time he had actively said he *wanted* something since they had married. As long as it wasn't excessive, Aura had wanted to do such a thing for him for some time.

“Also, I used the local sand and shellfish to make silica sand and slaked lime. They'll probably bring it back, so try it out for making glass.”

Of course, most of the substance had been used to wipe out the scents of the raptors, so there might not be any left. But as he told her that, Aura smiled happily.

“Oh, I suppose that would be your souvenir from Valentia. Very well, I shall look forward to the attempt.”

The words “souvenir from Valentia” sparked something in his head for some reason.

“Yeah, that's...ri...ght...? Am I forgetting something?”

It was an awful sensation, the certainty that he was leaving something out but not knowing exactly what it was he had forgotten. Zenjirou tilted his head back and forth with that feeling assailing him, trying to recall what he was forgetting.

“Forgetting something?” Aura asked. “What is it, something important?”

“Hmm, maybe? I can't remember that either. You had just mentioned souvenirs when I thought about it.”

“Souvenirs? Did you intend to bring any for people other than me?”

She had been going to make a joke that he wasn't to have an affair, and that if

he felt the need, he should take a concubine, but he'd already stopped listening.

"I remembered..." he said in a strangled whisper, pale-faced. "Coral and pearls. I forgot Prince Francesco and Princess Bona's souvenirs!"

He had promised to bring back materials for their jewelry from the port town. However, he had completely forgotten while he was there.

"Argh, what do I do?! It was a promise between royals! I'm sorry, Aura, but I need you to send me back tomorrow!"

"Calm down, we can get coral and pearls here as well," Aura said soothingly, but Zenjirou recoiled.

"I can't do that! That's like buying your foreign souvenirs from Narita airport! It's entirely against the point!"

"Okay, calm down. I cannot understand your example in the slightest. In which case, we can send a wyvern to Ines and Rafaello. We cannot simply use teleportation willy-nilly!"

"Ahh, but the duty of acquiring souvenirs holds that the giver must take responsibility for choosing the gifts themselves! Prince Francesco, Princess Bona, I'm so sorry!" Zenjirou continued, ignoring Aura's confused attempts to calm him as he offered penitence for his transgressions.

To be continued in *The Ideal Sponger Life* 6.

Appendix — The Lord and Maids' Special Training

Zenjirou Capua, formerly Yamai Zenjirou, was both prince consort of Queen Aura I of Capua and the lord of the inner palace.

From the day he had married her, he had spent each night in the inner palace. He had been working in the royal palace more as of late, so it was now fairly common for him to be out and about during the day, but he had never slept outside of the inner palace. This marked the first time he would have a prolonged absence from his home.

Zenjirou had gone to Valentia as Aura's proxy. His trip would last for at least a month, and whispers of what it would mean spread among the young maids. Perhaps they would get some time off.

It was hardly a strange direction for their thoughts to take. Live-in maids were destined to get no time off as long as their master was in residence. Therefore, now that he was gone for a time, chances to relax would be relatively common.

Of course, this would depend on the prince consort's whims, but Zenjirou—their master in name—was the softest touch one could find, and Aura—more practically their mistress—wasn't the kind to work people unnecessarily. It was inevitable that a sense of hope for vacation time would spread through the young maids.

Head Maid Amanda, however, had other thoughts. Thoughts like, *This is my chance to tighten up on discipline in a way I could not with Sir Zenjirou present.*

The next day, all of the inner palace maids were gathered in a room of their workplace. The space was more than big enough, but it was plain and a room that the master and mistress had never entered. It was “backstage,” if you would.

The maids wore their scarlet uniforms and lined up in the large room. Amanda looked at her subordinates and began to speak in her usual tone.

“As I am sure you are all aware, our lord, Sir Zenjirou, has departed for

Valentia.”

The young maids listened carefully as she began. Even now, the more perceptive amongst them could tell they weren’t going to like what they were about to hear.

To either side of Amanda were the maids in charge of each aspect of service in the inner palace. One of them, the head of cooking—Vanessa—was stifling a twisted smile. If she were to verbalize that smile, it would be something along the lines of “my sympathies” or “my condolences.”

The chances of this being a declaration of time off were slipping away. While a small portion of the maids was preparing themselves, Amanda continued easily.

“I believe this to be an exceptional opportunity. Our master, Sir Zenjirou, is an exceedingly amiable person. What he wants from the inner palace is a peaceful environment and somewhere to relax. Therefore, I have refrained from finding too much fault with your work.”

A silent incredulity floated around the young maids at those words. However, Amanda’s claims were not incorrect. The girls themselves had apparently forgotten, but when Zenjirou had first arrived, they had been all taut with nerves, taking the greatest care not to make even small mistakes as they set about their work. However much they hid their nervousness, more sensitive people would still pick up on it. Regardless of how perfect their work was, Zenjirou couldn’t be comfortable surrounded by people as nervous as they had been. Naturally, he had never explicitly *said* that their anxiety made him uncomfortable, though.

Amanda was a maid of such ability that Aura had personally appointed her to the inner palace. A true maid would intuit her master’s desires even if they weren’t spoken and act to fulfill them before any order passed his lips. Amanda had quickly surmised that Zenjirou didn’t want utterly faultless work, but rather a place suited for relaxation. Therefore, she had eased off the younger maids without their noticing. Thus, they had been able to work at ease without being nervous. Amanda, as the head maid, should have been one of the people they were most afraid of.

The fact that they were clearly unhappy about what she was saying, in front of her, no less, was proof of that slackening discipline. She had seen their reactions coming and gave an exaggerated sigh before continuing.

“Fortunately, Sir Zenjirou is satisfied with your work. However, your awareness and skills have been gradually lowering below what is expected of you as a maid of the inner palace. This is something I cannot ignore.”

The reactions to this statement were varied. Some of the girls had a clue as to where this was going and stifled their expressions. Some of them pouted as if to disagree. The majority didn’t know where this was going and simply looked at her questioningly. That confusion was perhaps to be expected. Amanda hadn’t eased up on them enough to be called “easygoing,” and the work the maids were doing was certainly sufficient.

But they were maids of *the inner palace*. They shouldn’t be aiming for “sufficient,” they should be aiming higher. Amanda believed she had a duty to turn these girls into the best maids possible. She clapped her hands and spoke in a carrying voice.

“Therefore, from this day until Sir Zenjirou returns, you will receive special training. If you’re all in agreement, ladies?”

It was worded as a question, but the young maids of course had no right to refuse.

“Yes, ma’am!”

Naturally, no one present failed to understand that. Special training directly from Amanda. The maids all felt fear to some extent from that possibility.

The three problem maids, as they were known, Faye, Dolores, and Letti, were on the far end of that spectrum. The three had been reassigned to cleaning and walked the corridors of the inner palace with the heavy gait of cattle off to the slaughterhouse.

“Argh, why are we on cleaning duty *now*, of all times?” Faye complained, shaking her head and sending her short, frizzy hair flying.

“The timing is the worst, yeah,” Dolores answered heavily, despite her usual tendency to dispute anything Faye said. She was particularly tall among the

maids but her slumped posture made her seem about a fist shorter than usual.

Ines would usually have been their section leader for cleaning, but she was with Zenjirou in Valentia. Thus, Amanda was carrying out her responsibilities. The others weren't exactly soft either, but it would be far better than being trained directly by Amanda.

"Aha ha, there's nothing we can do about it. If we try hard, she'll approve." Letti tried to soothe them, optimistic at heart. However, it had no effect on her two roommates.

"That's not going to happen, Letti. I mean, it's Head Maid Amanda."

"You're right...she'll approve of the effort, but the results are another thing," Dolores commented.

Her thoughts were harsh. Amanda would most certainly approve of the effort they put in, but she wouldn't allow effort without commensurate results to pass. She would say something like "You worked hard every day; I am impressed. Ensure that you put your minds to what you can accomplish with that effort."

They would be praised for the effort itself, but it would have no impact on her judgment. What was more, her judgment was exceptionally strict.

Still, even if their heads were hung and their steps heavy, they would eventually arrive at their destination.

"Ah, we're here," Faye said.

"Well, nothing for it, okay? Are you both ready?" Letti asked.

"Yeah, let's give it our best," Dolores added.

The three of them stood in front of the living room, and once they'd gotten themselves under control, they knocked on the door.

"Right, let us begin," Amanda said as soon as they had entered. "First, we shall clean the room as usual. Afterwards, we shall take advantage of the opportunity to clean the carpet as well."

The three girls' faces drew tight at the smooth instructions immediately following their entrance. Cleaning the carpet was a particularly difficult job,

even for the accomplished maids. It meant using a heavily wrung cloth to scrub the entire, absolutely massive carpet, getting out all the dust and hairs that had twined around the piles.

The room was hardly tiny—it was thirty to fifty square meters. Of course, the carpet didn't cover the entirety of the room, but it did cover about half of it. Still, considering the effort the cleaning would require, it was intimidatingly massive.

Such a cleaning would ordinarily have been done every day, but unfortunately, Zenjirou spent the majority of his time in this room, so they had very few openings for cleaning. Therefore, the daily routine had been reduced to merely dusting wherever there was visible dirt.

Now that Zenjirou wasn't here, Amanda's eagerness was to be expected.

"Now then, begin."

"Yes, ma'am."

Of course, the young maids were in no position to refute the eager head maid's order.

About two hours later, Amanda clapped her hands.

"Right, that should be sufficient," she said.

At this point, Faye, Dolores, and Letti all felt like they were about to pitch forward into the carpet themselves.

"My arms are dead..." Faye lamented.

"Ugh, my knees..." added Letti.

Dolores could only gasp for air.

They had their hair covered with long scarves to stop any strands from falling onto the floor, and cleaning the carpet after so long had utterly exhausted them.

Amanda's cold judgment rained down upon them. "Do you not remember? You accomplished this far more easily when you were first assigned to the inner palace. You have degraded to the point where even this is enough to exhaust

you.”

The maids had, of course, been there longer than Zenjirou and had originally cleaned to this extent on a daily basis. Her statement reminded them that they had been utterly focused on completing their tasks to perfection before and hadn't complained or whined even once. There was no rebuttal they could offer with that comparison in mind.

Whatever else they may have been, the group had an idea of the minimum expected of them as maids of the inner palace and had strangely regretful expressions for once. Their expressions told Amanda that her words had gotten through to the girls, and her expression softened ever so slightly.

“Before long, you will be leaving the inner palace and returning home. Marriage will be awaiting you then, and you will carry both your families' names and your titles of former inner palace maid. You cannot forget that.”

“Our apologies, ma'am; you're quite right,” Dolores said, bowing humbly. A beat later, Faye and Letti followed suit. The refinement of their bows showed that they were indeed maids of the inner palace.

Everything Amanda had said was the truth. Unlike herself or the division heads, the young maids had much shorter terms of service. This was not due to any concerns on their employer's side but rather out of consideration for the young women themselves.

The work required them to live where they worked and led to a separation from society. Particularly in Capua, where the master of the inner palace was a man and it was expected, almost hoped, that they would get involved. For that reason, the requirements for becoming a maid were to be young and charming, but also to have no lover or fiancé. The majority of the time they could otherwise “sell themselves” was spent in the inner palace. If the entirety of that was consumed by their work, the remnants of their life could quite easily be tragic.

Whatever else, they had been recommended as maids for the inner palace, so they were aware of what their families would expect. They couldn't afford to disappoint the head maid. They had a duty to polish their skills to such a level as to live up to the reputation of an inner palace maid. The three clenched their

fists with rare looks of seriousness on their faces.

“Now, we are to clean the bedroom next. Sir Zenjirou has graciously allowed the use of the air conditioner while we work, but do not allow that to make you purposefully take longer. Understood?”

“Understood,” came the answer after a pause, the temptation of the AC almost being too much for them and delaying their response.



Once the three had finished their day of stress under the careful supervision of the head maid, they were relaxing in their room that night, fatigued.

“Ah, that’s the spot. Oh, not quite... Ahh, at least you’re good at massages,” Dolores sighed.

“Guh, this, ugh, just isn’t fair, you giant!” Faye complained from where she was straddling Dolores’s underwear-clad form and massaging her back and shoulders.

The three had, at some point, agreed that they would give each other massages after work, but Faye always complained about it. True, it did seem like it would be more difficult for Faye to massage Dolores, given the size difference. But once the three of them had finished their massages by the dim light of the oil lamp, they each sat on their own beds and enjoyed some chatter before going to sleep.

“Anyway, she’s way too imposing. I felt like I was going to die, and she was only watching me!” Faye complained, kicking her legs in the air as she sat on her bed.

“You’re right,” Dolores agreed. Her bed was the same height, but her feet actually reached the ground. “She watches you terrifyingly closely. If Madam Ines is ‘watching over’ us, then Madam Amanda is definitely ‘*keeping* watch on’ us.”

It was an almost cruel expression of how different their heights were, but fortunately, neither of them were particularly insecure about it, so it didn’t lead to any excessive arguments.

“For real, she could have been a little less harsh.”

“There’s nothing we can do about it, Faye,” Letti chided her pouting roommate with a soft smile. “We really *have* gotten worse.”

Letti had an honest disposition, so she had taken Amanda’s words and really considered them. Perhaps they had indeed been slacking off lately. While her appearance and personality were a bit soft and it might not be an obvious change, Letti truthfully intended to turn over a new leaf.

Faye, however, had another opinion. “I get that. *But* isn’t our master Sir Zenjirou? Honestly, doesn’t it seem like he enjoys us slacking like we do?”

It was an irrefutable fact that Zenjirou had warmed to the three problem maids before any of the others. The thing that had caught his attention was that they were the first to lose their air of nervousness around him. With that in mind, there was a certain thread of logic to what she was saying.

“It’s still a problem of degree. Besides, Sir Zenjirou is definitely in the minority as far as masters go. If you really want to aim to become his concubine then that’s fine, but if not, you need to be ready to be a maid that society will accept. She didn’t put it exactly like that, but it’s all bridal training as well,” Dolores argued, knowing how things went and being more judgmental.

“Huh, marriage... I haven’t thought much about it yet,” Faye mused, flopping back onto the bed while still kicking her legs in the air.

While Faye could move around the capital’s downtown area without seeming out of place, she was still a full-fledged noble girl. When she returned to her home—before too long, now—she knew she would select a husband from her parents’ choices, and she was prepared for that. However, she had adapted to life in the inner palace and had started to feel her new lifestyle would continue forever.

“Well, I understand where you’re coming from,” Dolores agreed with a shrug of her slim shoulders. “Even though we’re the ones getting married, it’s usually our fathers who choose the husband, so it ends up feeling like it’s got nothing to do with us.”

The inner palace was a form of seclusion, and even though they knew it was

only temporary, it still made them feel unconnected to their prior lives.

“If only we could stay here forever...” Letti mused. The words that slipped past her lips were without a doubt her honest opinion. She would marry for the sake of her family. While she had no intention of going against that, it was still human nature for her to want her current enjoyment to last indefinitely.

“That’s not going to happen, Letti. If you absolutely have to, though, you’ll need to get Sir Zenjirou to fall for you,” Faye teased.

“Yup, that’s not going to happen,” Dolores agreed, joining in on the joke.

While the way it was put might have made it sound like they were disparaging her charms, not even Letti was angry at the statement.

“Well, of course not. Actually, I don’t think he has eyes for any of us maids,” she agreed. The opinion wasn’t one unique to her either; it was one held by all the maids of the inner palace. That was how much the prince consort avoided looking at them sexually.

Recently, his gaze had been trailing after their legs bared by the miniskirts of the uniform or else drawn to their cleavage when they were working nearby, but he’d always immediately averted his eyes. It wasn’t as if he didn’t see them as women, but considering he hadn’t made a move on any of them even after an entire year under the same roof, their prospects were definitely slim.

“You’re not wrong,” agreed Faye.

“If he’d been interested in anyone, he’d have made a move while Her Majesty was pregnant,” Dolores added.

The conversation had slipped into discussing their master’s relationships. Whatever else they were, the girls were of that age where they had a weakness for romance stories, whether they were involved or not.

“Huh? But didn’t Her Majesty sleep in the same room even then? It might have been in another bed, but still. There couldn’t have been any room for another woman like that,” Faye asked.

“Didn’t you hear, you idiot? That was Sir Zenjirou’s suggestion. As soon as they knew Her Majesty was pregnant, she had intended to sleep in another

room. Sir Zenjirou said he wanted to sleep in the same room, even if they couldn't sleep in the same bed, and had another one brought in."

"Whoa, he must really love her."

Zenjirou and Aura were both masters they were rather happy to have, so any pleasant tales of them would inevitably raise the mood.

Even noble girls—who lived with the knowledge that marriage would unavoidably be political—longed for real romance. However, their knowledge meant that they had a somewhat harsher outlook on it than the average girl. That was all the more true when it concerned where they worked.

"Anyway, the most important thing is that Sir Zenjirou and Her Majesty have a good relationship. Apparently, working in the household gets much more difficult when the couple is quarreling. If an angry couple cut themselves off from each other, that'd be easiest, but if one of them frantically keeps at it while the other stays cold, it's the worst. The pursuer grows unhappy at the constant lack of response, and the one being pursued gets annoyed at the constant pressing. Then all that resentment gets taken out on the support staff like us," Dolores told them.

"Ergh..." Faye grimaced.

"I'm so glad they have a good relationship!" Letti exclaimed in relief.

"Same here. Oh, but there'll be a concubine eventually, right? Do you think things won't be as peaceful then?" Faye asked in sudden realization. She was both a noble's daughter and a maid of the inner palace, so she was aware of the position that Zenjirou had been placed in.

It was impossible for the only adult male capable of using the royal lineal magic (particularly since he was in his twenties) would be able to stay with only the queen forever.

However, the rebuttal came from the most realistic of the three, Dolores. "Hmmm, I'm not too sure about that. I think you're right that he'll eventually need to take a concubine, but that won't necessarily worsen the atmosphere here."

"Why's that, Dolores?" Letti asked curiously.

“Well, a concubine is just a concubine. Her Majesty is still going to be his legal wife, right? Do you honestly think there’s a concubine that can compete with her?” Dolores asked, explaining her opinion.

Aura was practically the embodiment of an Amazon. It would indeed be rather difficult for an average woman to compete with her. Besides, the difference in standing between legal wife and concubine was a rather large handicap. On top of that, Aura was wickedly intelligent and strong-willed and had thoroughly captured Zenjirou’s heart. All of that meant that Dolores’s opinion that no concubine would have the leeway to cause any trouble was quite sensible.

“I see,” Faye answered. “It definitely would take a lot of courage to go against Her Majesty.”

Despite that, Letti wasn’t entirely convinced. “Huh? But wouldn’t she take her annoyance over that out on us?”

It was a plausible concern, but Dolores disagreed with that too. “That’s where Sir Zenjirou comes in. Have you forgotten? Why was he happiest with the three of us before any of the others?”

“Huh?”

“Oh, right, that makes sense.”

Faye and Letti were both intelligent enough to understand her implication. The reason he had preferred them originally was due to his dislike of being around people that were strained mentally. Thus, he had accepted the three problem maids first, as they couldn’t keep up the tension as much as the others. In that respect, Zenjirou would never allow a concubine to worsen the inner palace by taking out her displeasure on the maids.

“That makes sense. Then what kind of person would he choose?” Letti asked innocently.

The other two exchanged looks. That was certainly something they wondered about. It would need to be a woman who wouldn’t find fault with the maids even though Zenjirou’s affections were directed towards the queen. What kind of saint would that be?

“I suppose even Sir Zenjirou would be partial to a woman who was *that* wonderful.”

“Don’t you think we’ve gotten a bit off-topic?”

The young maids’ romance chat continued without end.



The next day, Faye, Letti, and Dolores all did the same work as the day before and cleaned the living room. They used a duster to knock down any dust, a damp cloth to wipe the table, and a long broom to sweep the floor.

The three of them were busy, but Dolores was a little more focused that day and noticed that Amanda’s gaze was sometimes flicking unnaturally off to the side.

I wonder what’s going on? she thought as she dusted, having been given the role due to her height.

The fact that the head maid was looking away from them despite giving them special training gave Dolores a bad feeling, and that feeling was almost immediately made a reality.

“You are a minute behind schedule compared to yesterday. Get yourselves together,” Amanda said, her gaze on the digital clock in a corner of the room.

“Ah, my apologies,” Dolores answered immediately. The fact that she managed to react so quickly despite her gasp of surprise was impressive in itself.

Faye and Letti both let out sounds of confusion and paused to look.

“What is it? Neither of you are working.”

“Ah, right!”

“Sorry!”

The two of them hurriedly resumed, but their minds were ruled by surprise.

She was looking at the clock? Dolores couldn’t believe her eyes. It didn’t change the truth, though. Until recently, the only maids who could read the time shown in intervals of 24 hours, 60 minutes, and 60 seconds were the three

of them, what with their obsession with video games. However, Amanda had apparently acquired the knowledge as well. This was a grave situation for them.

This is bad; she's going to be working us to the minute now!

Unfortunately, Dolores's concerns proved to be true.



“Argh, this is the worst! She can read the clock now!” Faye squealed like a stuck pig as she lay on the table at lunch.

They were in a corner of the kitchen as they took their break. Lunchtime included a siesta during the hottest part of the year, so a lot of the maids simply took their food and went to their rooms to eat. The break wasn't as long during this time of the year, though, so everyone was eating together.

“We screwed up,” Faye added, her voice despondent despite still sitting up, unlike her companion. “We underestimated Madam Amanda...”

As Dolores had worried, their cleaning had been monitored to the minute. They hadn't noticed the day before due to being utterly focused on their work, but Amanda had been literally timing their pace. If they slowed down even slightly compared to the day before, she would interject with something like, “You've slowed down... You finished this a minute quicker yesterday.” Or if they focused too much on their speed and worked haphazardly, she would order them to redo it to get what they'd missed.

The training was harsh enough to discourage them in the middle of their work, although this was to be expected when receiving training directly from Amanda herself.

“Here, good work today. Amanda must be pretty tough, right? Eat this too and keep your energy up for this afternoon,” Vanessa told them. The stout, middle-aged woman spoke in her usual jovial tone as she placed their meals on the table.

“Madam Vanessa!”

“Thank you.”

“Whoa! We can eat this?!”

Sitting before them was a browned flatbread, spiced vegetable soup, and drake meat fried in fine sesame oil. It all looked fresh from the oven, and steam rose from them along with the rich scents of the food. Ordinarily, the maids ate whatever could be made quickly in between Zenjirou and Aura's meals, but this was most definitely more than that. Considering the ingredients and time that had gone into them, they were meals that would normally be found on the royal dining table.

Vanessa put her hands on her round hips and laughed at the three forgetting their earlier exhaustion and cheering.

"Ha ha ha, of course! Her Majesty won't be returning until tonight. We can't let ourselves slip during this period of special training either. Therefore, the meals today were us practicing the royal palace's cuisine. Her Majesty and Amanda both gave permission, so dig in."

The only way to improve one's cooking skills was to actually cook. However, they couldn't serve their masters with *practice* food. Therefore, the maids took the roles of taste testers from time to time.

"In that case, I will!"

"Thank you!"

"Woow, it looks so good."

With joy on their faces, the three of them reached for the food.

Capua was one of the biggest producers of spices and sugar, so their cuisine was rich as a rule. Dolores used a big wooden spoon to scoop up a helping from the bowl. The soup was reddened by the large amounts of spices, and the contrast of the green leaves floating inside made her even hungrier. She put the whole spoonful of soup and leaf vegetables into her mouth, and her eyes widened in surprise.

"Huh? Is this the normal seasoning?"

It was a somewhat cryptic impression of the dish.

"What are you talking about?" Faye asked.

"Dolores, we can't get your point from that," Letti added.

“Try it. You’ll see what I mean,” she replied.

Despite their confusion, they did as she said and took a mouthful of the soup before crying out in surprise.

“Huh, you’re right!”

“Yeah, this isn’t how Sir Zenjirou normally has it spiced! It’s the traditional version,” Letti explained, making it easier to understand with the greater knowledge of cooking she possessed.

The cuisine in the inner palace was, naturally, made to Zenjirou and Aura’s tastes. Aura’s tastes weren’t too out of the ordinary for Capua—the problem was Zenjirou. With his modern Japanese upbringing, he wasn’t fundamentally picky, but when it came to food from a completely different world, it was another matter entirely. He didn’t mind sometimes eating the herbs used in the soups or the purposefully matured meat, but there were meals he wouldn’t eat every day.

Thus, the seasoning in the inner palace had gradually diverged from that of the royal palace. However, the meal in front of them now was one of the ordinary meals from the royal palace.

Vanessa answered the surprised trio loudly. “It’s obvious, really. These are for practice. While you certainly need to be able to cook to Sir Zenjirou’s preferences, that’s the culmination of this practice. We’re supposed to be training, after all, so strengthening the basics is the best.”

In other words, now that they didn’t need to cater to Zenjirou’s somewhat abnormal seasoning preferences, she could have them prepare more standard meals. It certainly made sense to start practicing from the ground up. Learning to cook strictly to Zenjirou’s otherworldly preferences wouldn’t be helpful as a more general maid in the future. Once they left the inner palace and married, if their cooking was customized to Zenjirou’s tastes, the family they married into would most certainly be disappointed. While not the case for higher-class nobles, cooking skill was still one of the requirements of a good wife for lower nobles.

It was naturally Dolores who caught the implication of her words. “Wait, this is part of the training? So who made it?”

Vanessa smiled broadly at the question. “You guessed right; it wasn’t me. It was the girls on cooking duty for today. I simply supervised. What do you think?” she asked.

Faye was the first to answer, having stuffed herself with the fried meat. “Huh, really? I couldn’t tell. It was so good!”

Despite her energetic answer, it was well known that Faye didn’t have the most developed of tastes.

“Oh, I see. What about you two?” she continued, her gaze moving on to Dolores and Letti.

Now knowing that it was made for training purposes, Dolores picked up the flatbread and carefully tore off a piece before eating it. “Well, I think it isn’t quite as good as something you would make.”

Dolores wasn’t the best at cooking, but she had a palate that could rival anyone else’s, so she was a good person to ask.

“Oh? How, exactly?” Vanessa asked, her face growing more amused.

“Well, the best place to start would probably be the soup? The vegetables are cut into squares, but the sizes are all quite different. If you’d made it, they would be much closer in size.”

By the time Dolores finished speaking, Letti had completed her own taste-testing and added her thoughts. “That’s right. The bread is a little too firm as well, I think. Maybe they kneaded it too much? Parts of the meat are burned a bit, so the oil was probably too hot?”

Letti excelled, at least in cooking, compared to the other maids, so her observations were more technical than Dolores’s. Her spacy expression didn’t change, but cooking was the one thing she spoke clearly about.

Their impressions seemed to fit Vanessa’s expectations as she turned and called across the room, “There you go. Your customers aren’t happy with it. I’ll be drilling you on it this afternoon, so look forward to that.”

This was what finally made the trio notice their coworkers standing behind Vanessa. Their expressions were noticeably dull and somewhat familiar... They

were the same expressions the problem trio had had on their own faces just a little earlier. Indeed, the same looks they had worn throughout Amanda's training.

"Ah, Kisha?"

"Oh, Conchita, was the soup yours?"

"Hey, Sabrina!"

The group called out to their colleagues from where they sat. All three were tall—although not to the same degree as Dolores—and all of them had full chests—although not to the same extent as Letti.

The young maids of the inner palace had originally been chosen to suit Zenjiro's tastes—that is, a woman with a similar height and figure to Aura—so this was a fairly common description. If anything, Faye and Dolores were the exceptions due to their short stature and slender figure, respectively. Those tall, good-looking girls all had grim faces at the moment. Sabrina was even on the verge of tears. They focused on Dolores and Letti with misty eyes and spoke in strangled voices.

"Dolores...I'll remember this," Kisha told her.

"Letti, this is the first time I've ever hated that you never lie about cooking..." Conchita despaired.

"Argh, if only the two of you had the same tastes as Faye."

"Ha ha ha," Vanessa laughed at them, clapping them on the backs. "The results are in. Prepare yourselves. Don't worry, though; I'm confident in my instruction. I'll have you trained up so you won't embarrass yourselves no matter *where* you cook."

"Huh, it sort of feels like we're not the only ones struggling," Faye remarked blankly.

"Well, it's special training," Dolores told her with a rueful smile. "It'll be the same for all of us."

They had known they were going to continue receiving Amanda's special training that afternoon, so it had seemed a little unfair that their colleagues

would have it easier. If they were descending to hell, they should at least have company.

With slight darkness entering her smile, Dolores looked pointedly at the soup in her bowl and ripped into it like a critical mother-in-law.

“Oh, now that I look even closer, I think there might be too many herbs in this. Perhaps the bitterness is due to overheating it?”

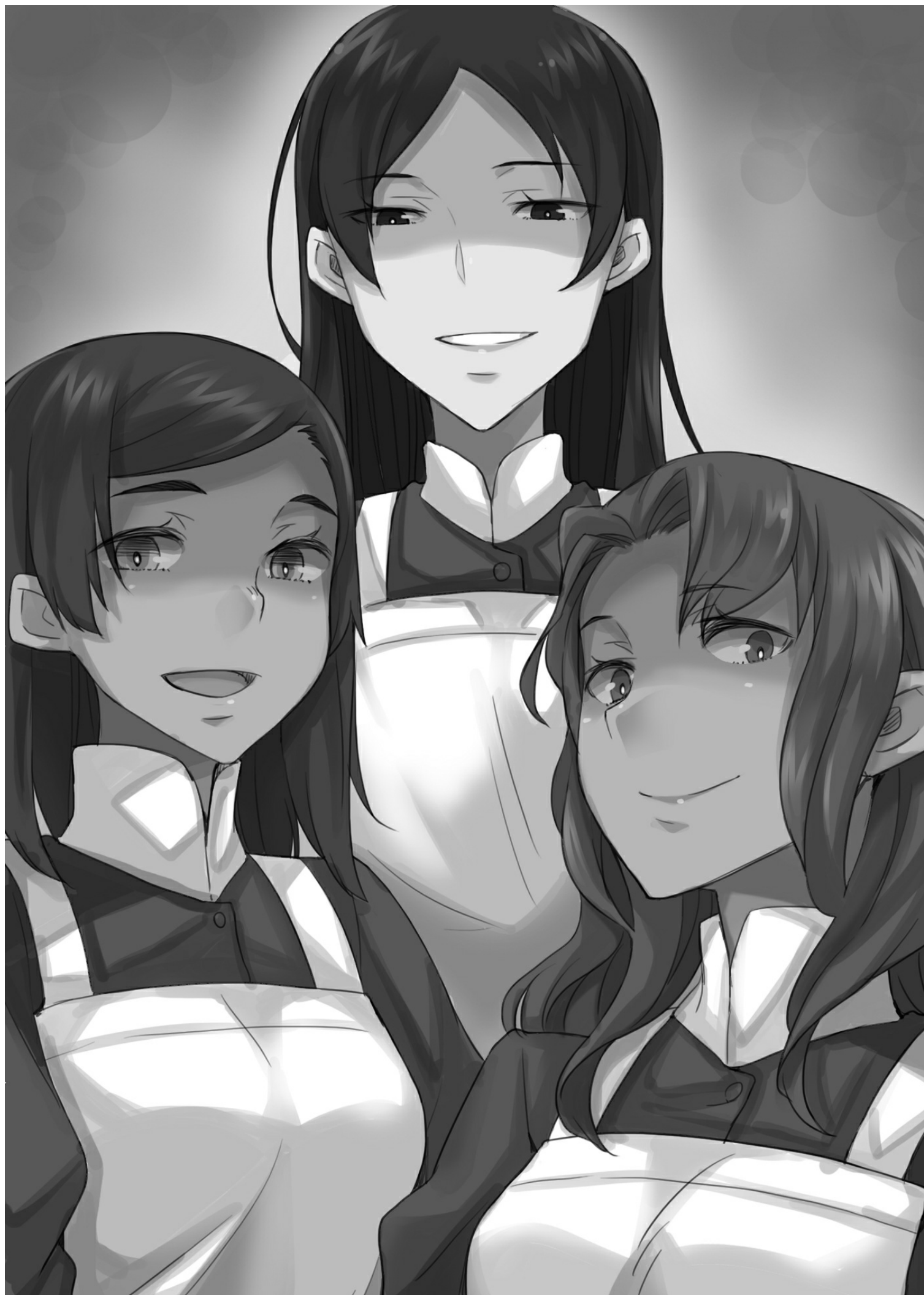
“Ah, you’re right. The flatbread isn’t just too hard; it’s overcooked in some places. Maybe it was in the oven too long?” Letti added, in agreement, totally innocently.

Of course, whether the critique was purposefully or unintentionally harsh made no real difference to the targets.

“Dolores...mark my words, I’ll remember this.”

“Letti, I know you aren’t being mean for the sake of it, but there are things you just can’t get away with.”

“You’ll regret this!”



As the girls' faces morphed into looks of grinning rage, Vanessa's full stomach started to shake with her laughter.

"Gah ha ha ha! I see, I see. Well then, I'll have to step up my training. First, we'll practice keeping the pot moving. After that, we'll use the discards from the vegetables to practice cutting them more finely. We've got plenty of firewood too, so we'll finish off with using the oven."

The looks on her maids' faces said that if they had been allowed to, they would have fled immediately. Of course, Vanessa wouldn't be going easy on them. While she was the most relaxed of the division heads, she was by no means an easy superior to deal with in her domain.

"Come on, disappointment doesn't get your work done," she said briskly. "Back to work, back to work."

"Yes, ma'am..."

Dolores watched her coworkers shuffle off after a whack from Vanessa on their hips with an unconcerned smile on her face. Suddenly, Vanessa turned back to them and spoke.

"That was rather bold of you three. It will come back to you as well, you know."

The problem trio all let out confused noises. Vanessa's smile grew.

"Of course. After all, it's special training. Did you think it would be over once you finished your stint in your current division? Sir Zenjirou will be in Valentia for at least a month, and we want you all to get some training in every area, so we're speeding up the rotations. If I remember correctly, the three of you will be working with me in just a few days from now."

Faye and Dolores exchanged looks while Letti happily clapped her hands together in front of her full chest.

"Really, Madam Vanessa?! I'll do my best!"

Dolores's expression was particularly dire. Remembering her earlier words, she tried to keep a smile on her face even as a cold sweat sprung up on her forehead.

“M-Madam Vanessa? Well, my opinion earlier? I, ah, might have gone too far. Um, ah, the food was plenty good. So, if you could ease up on Conchita and the others—”

However, the girl in question—Conchita—cut her off. “That isn’t necessary, Madam Vanessa.”

“Indeed, we’ve already prepared ourselves.”

“We’ll do our absolute best.”

The three maids on kitchen duty had dark smiles on their faces as they gave exemplary responses.

“Dolores?” Conchita drew her attention.

“We’ll be tasting your food in three days.”

“So make sure to look forward to that...’kay?!”

Their words were forceful.

“Really?” Letti asked. “Yeah, I will. I’ll work hard.” She was still innocently motivated, but she was the only one.

“Hey, Dolores?!” Faye demanded. “Did you just drag me into this mess?!”

“N-No way. It was just a joke, right. Right? Conchita? Kisha, Sabrina, say something!” Dolores insisted, desperately trying to keep up her excuses as Faye blamed her for their upcoming predicament.

THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

5

Illustrator:
**Jyuu
Ayakura**

Author:
**Tsunehiko
Watanabe**

Aura was leading
an urgent, unofficial
meeting in a small
conference room in
the palace.





Two women appeared from behind the door. The woman walking in front was the self-proclaimed first princess of Uppasala Kingdom, **Freya Uppasala**. Behind her was the female warrior, **Skaji**. The first thing that caught his eye when he saw Freya was her hairstyle. Her strangely bluish silver-colored hair was chopped short and straight across.



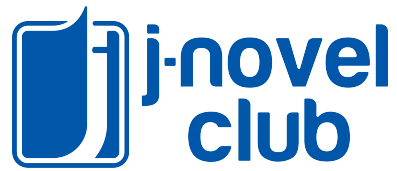
Skaji began to spin.
Using the force of her spin, she hurled
her short spear at the fleeing raptor.
She then gave her flying spear even more
force by kicking the butt of it with a
reverse roundhouse.



Zenjirou could hardly miss the implication of Bona's desires.

"Indeed. I look forward to seeing the creations. Both Prince Francesco's, and of course your own, Princess Bona,"

he answered, making it clear that souvenirs would be forthcoming for both Francesco and Bona.



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The Ideal Sponger Life: Volume 5

by Tsunehiko Watanabe

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RISOU NO HIMOSEIKATSU

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Originally published in Japan by Shufunotomo Infos Co., Ltd.

Through Shufunotomo Co., Ltd.

Translation rights arranged with Shufunotomo Co., Ltd.

English translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: November 2021